

Civilization: Can We Survive It?

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Nearly 2000 years ago, near the beginning of what some fondly call the Christian era, an army came marching across the British Isles. Thousands of soldiers, uniformed and armored in a manner never before seen in that part of the world, sent the tribal peoples fleeing westward and set about establishing fortresses and cities. Britain was now part of the Roman Empire. Civilization had arrived.

It's a pattern which has been repeated all over the world, as recently as 100 years ago in parts of the American West. The tendency of people to cluster together in great cities is hardly new and in many ways understandable. What isn't so clear is why the city-dwellers feel compelled to make the whole planet over in their image.

Whether we look at Britain or the Americas or Australia, we see the same phenomenon: people living a tribal, rural existence that changes slowly if at all for thousands of years until the arrival of foreign interlopers, who, usually with great violence, impose an entirely new way of life within a matter of decades. The common denominator in all of the above examples is that the invaders were white Europeans, but the Chinese have done much the same thing, albeit more gradually, to large parts of Asia.

So while it may seem that modern urban life is only a logical evolution from the clans and villages of earlier times, that's not really the case. Villages came into being to serve the needs of the countryside, to provide a central location for trading and social interaction. Cities have reversed that equation; the countryside is seen as useful only insofar as it makes possible the continued existence and expansion of cities.

Without a drastic depopulation of the planet, it's unlikely that we could return to a pastoral way of life, and it's probably desirable, either. The division of labor that makes civilization possible has also freed the poets and artists and crazy dreamers from the necessity of tilling the fields, and it's allowed millions of us who a century ago would have been peasants bound to the land to travel about the planet and gather in the accumulated knowledge of our species.

But it's also left us dangerously detached from the earth, to the point where it no longer even seems strange that in the name of progress we are willing to poison, starve, and strangle the planet that makes life possible, the planet that native peoples have almost without exception revered as the mother of all life. Mother earth, mother nature, these have in our time become no more than figures of speech; once they were self-evident statements of truth.

To speak of the earth as being alive raises more than a few eyebrows and leaves one open to charges of being a muddle-brained California beansprout worshiper. But with the exception of recent centuries, it is the way people have always seen things. If it is farfetched to think of the rocks and fields as living, breathing entities, how much more so to construct parallel universes beyond the skies where supernatural beings cavort and manipulate our destinies here on earth? Yet that is the essence of all “modern” religions, from the Greco-Roman pantheon to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc...

There is nothing mystical or metaphysical about attributing conscious existence to the planet; simple science will explain it. Life comes from life; rocks don't breed. Or do they? A few billion years ago this planet was a hunk of rock floating in the void. Take a look at it now; where did all this come from? Either life was brought here from somewhere else or it was here all along.

Either way, it's here now, and even though we as a race are doing our best to destroy it. And that is the biggest curse of civilization, the sense of separation from the land, from each other, and from the fundamental processes of life itself. If we never feel the earth under our feet, how can we feel its heart beat? If we never see the sky uncolored by the brown, soupy shadow of our own excrement, how can we feel it breathe? If we have no idea of where our food comes from, of how water finds its way from deep within the soil to mingle with our blood, how the planet harbors everything we will ever need to live happy, fruitful lives, and how it will give us everything we ever need when we begin to understand its secrets, then we know nothing of ourselves.

In the closing years of the 20th century there is a rekindling of interest in tribal and pagan ways. There is a hunger for something real that abstract philosophies, artificial moralities, and the aimless manipulation of power can never satisfy. People remember. Somewhere beneath the encrusted layers of knowledge, superstition, fear, and greed they know where they came from. And where they're going to return.

Civilization is dying, and none too soon. That doesn't mean we have to revert to barbarism, or even to give up the many tools and technologies that have geometrically expanded our scope of possibilities. It does mean we need to rediscover who, what, and where we are, and fast. It means we means we have to rejoin our tribes, to learn what makes us strong and wise and free, and to stop trying to remake reality in our misshapen self-image. We need to listen with all our senses, we need to trust our hearts.

The heart is the key. Civilization so far has been a triumph of the human will run roughshod over nature. It is the individual ego gone rampant and multiplied five billion times. In past times we were prevented from fully indulging the basest of our impulses by the limitless, we need our hearts to provide us with a vision worthy of our capabilities.

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