

The evolution of culture

By Dave Reynolds

In common with most of the people I meet around Nimbin I tend to have a somewhat apocalyptic view of the future of mainstream culture.

Consumption fuelled by the 'shop till you drop' culture has devastated vast areas of the planet that nurtured over millions of years the conditions allowing carbon based life forms to emerge from a mass of chemicals in the most miraculous piece of alchemy imaginable. The transformation from abstract individual chemicals into independent self perpetuating life was both miraculous and statistically inevitable given the infinite nature of time.

The fact that there was in the first place a ball of glowing rock hurtling through space, generating a gravitational force which kept things stuck to the surface in close enough proximity to interrelate and combine was also miraculous.

Then consider that this hurtling rock ended up in orbit around an enormous nuclear reaction just the right distance away that an abundance of light energy was available as a power source to fuel the development of an atmosphere capable of shielding life from potentially damaging energy whilst allowing adequate amounts of the right sorts of radiation through.

Low odds you would have to admit, but again, given the quantity of opportunities in the vastness of even the known universe, perhaps this was also inevitable somewhere.

This unlikely chain of events then took on a new urgency driven by a mechanism described by Charlie Darwin as the survival of the fittest, now better understood as survival of the most adaptable or most interconnected.

The environment was slowly changed by the development of new life forms, their contribution to the atmosphere by way of transpiration and the creation of soils from their deceased bodies. Only the most adaptable life forms survived this self inflicted change. Most of life which has existed on earth has gone the way of extinction due to an inability to adapt to changing environmental conditions.

Organisms capable of adaptation created complex and diverse interrelationships between all living things and a natural balance emerged which was adaptable enough as a whole that whatever global calamities struck the flying ball of rock we call earth, some of the life force stubbornly survived to re-seed life in new and ever more complex directions. The whole of our planetary ecosystem evolved in this way over billions of years into the most incredible organism we can imagine.

The organism we know as earth, named Gaia by the Greeks has oceans and rivers as its circulatory systems, whales as its blood cells, volcanoes as teenage acne, hurricanes as its itches and trees as its lungs and as with our own bodies, imbalance of any one natural system manifests in all other systems.

Trees cannot be felled in isolation from the birds which feed on their seeds, the goannas that live in their hollows, the insects which feed on their nectar, the mites which live on the insects' underbellies, the tiny invertebrates

which digest the dung of the mites, the micro organisms which break down their waste products in turn, the network of worm tunnels which drag the replenished soil down into the depths, the fungi which break these nutrients down further and make them available again to the roots of understorey plants which grow in the dappled shade provided by the forest giants.

Vast colonies of species existed in great swathes of forest across the planet, feeding all life on earth with the oxygen they pumped out by day and balanced at night by Carbon Dioxide production which stimulates even our own hearts to beat. These forests formed the most diverse and complex systems we had the opportunity to observe, and in the last two centuries humans have cleared much of them to further the needs of one species alone.

The indigenous humans who have evolved along with these natural environments tell us that our role as humans is as custodians of this natural legacy and that the earth and all its life forms are sacred. From across the incredible range of habitats mankind has adapted to and colonized, the message was the same.

A central part of the role of humankind is to protect, nurture and preserve natural balance and through ritual practice to deepen our spiritual connection with the earth. These practices developed over millennia to ensure that the natural systems which support us remained intact for generations to come and were reinforced within human culture through initiations and rites of passage anchoring this responsibility with individuals as they grew into the role of the elders of the tribe.

The mainstream globalised culture prevalent today has abandoned these teachings. Western scientific reductionism has produced experts in such narrow fields that any ability to see the whole system which supports every being is lost in the resultant myopia. An expert in the gene translocation process in the reproductive cycle of the local Perons tree frog may not be able to name one bird which drinks from the water in which the frog breeds.

Compare this understanding with the knowledge of the indigenous elder who has never heard of genetics but who has memorised a thousand songs which tell of hidden interrelationships learned by observation and experience, passed on through a thousand generations which serve to nurture the Earth and humankind. Indigenous wisdom from our shared ancestors locates human culture within the natural world, recognising that all species emerged together from the primeval soup and became interdependently reliant on the maintenance of this web of complex relationships.

Interestingly modern systems understanding, grown from the development of computer networks, has allowed western science to develop a framework to move toward the indigenous viewpoint of interconnectedness.

Science is seemingly ready to prove what many of us know instinctively, that all plants and every creature share a common ancestry, we are all part of something much bigger, miraculous and planetary.

Human evolution seems to be entering a phase of spiritual maturity where we are ready to assume responsibility for what we create in the world around us. The majority of the people I meet around Nimbin already share this understanding and I am often shocked when I venture out into the world outside at the ignorance which drives the destructive practices which seem to be on the verge of overwhelming many of our natural systems.

Globally there are billions of dollars spent selling the message that increasing consumption and economic growth hold the future for human satisfaction, never mentioning that they surely will bring about a calamitous collapse in the life sustaining systems which allowed our evolutionary journey to reach this point. We simply do not have the understanding of the complexity of interrelationships necessary to know what the critical parameters are which could accelerate a collapse of one of our crucial life support systems, and we are expending vastly more resources to accelerate the destruction than we are to gain this fundamental knowledge.

The mass media pedals the myth that ecologically sound practices are at odds with high standards of living. Millions around the globe live in overpopulated cities, where their spiritual and emotional needs are substituted with created needs, drip fed into their consciousness by the cathode ray nipple of television and a web of marketing committed to increasing consumption as a way of raising living standards.

Contrast this to the ability to stretch out in the soft morning light of the hills, awakened at dawn by the whip birds and Kookaburras, eating food grown by ourselves in clean organic soil, time spent nurturing relationships, meeting one another and being met, investing our time in community and building a culture which honours human life and its diversity within the framework of an understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things.

Which of these models of human culture has the highest standard of living? It is clear to most of us that our choice of yardstick of living standards has great implications for our satisfaction.

If we believe that we need possessions to be happy, so be it. We can want and want all our lives and experience the dissatisfaction of never owning everything.

If we believe that we need to be a winner to be happy, so be it. We can fight and struggle with each other to create losers and drag one another into conflict for a thousand lifetimes.

If we believe in the moral high ground of victim hood we can appoint persecutors and rescuers and dance the eternal blame dance, never taking responsibility or developing empathy.

Every day in Nimbin I experience interactions with a group of people who believe in the possibility of Peace, happiness and self acceptance and I value the type of culture we build with such values at its core. I honour those people who are striving to co create this alternative to the mainstream culture, quietly, behind the scenes.

Rejecting hierarchy and encouraging inclusion there is a groundswell of men and women searching amongst the remnants of the

culture we have inherited for clues as to how to proceed.

Often we have nowhere to look for direction within our existing culture and many of our elders have failed us. Some of our elders and leaders would sound the bugle and send us into conflict based on their unresolved personal dissatisfactions. From them we have inherited a looming ecological disaster and a handful of patriarchal fundamentalist religious systems based on texts written in less enlightened times.

I am amazed that rational humans would continue to reject ancient wisdom derived from thousands of years of human existence as naïve and superstitious and then hold up any one book from the millions written as being the authoritative word of God.

This seems to me to be the naïve view. Time and again I see religious books held aloft in one hand by men sending other men into war, to die for a god who proclaims thou shalt not kill and I am reminded that we are all capable of hypocrisy.

The established religions have failed to deliver us from evil and the way of the blind devotee is being replaced by the way of the seeker of truth. More and more of us have turned inward to seek the higher understanding we need to build a sustainable and healthy society and we are succeeding in creating a community of self supporting but interconnected individuals.

We are resurrecting traditional initiations and rites of passage to mark major life changes and where these are not accessible or appropriate we are writing and enacting our own earth based rituals, consciously engaging the support of like minded men and women to assist us in assuming new social and ecological responsibilities.

In this way we are building the culture of the future.

In Nimbin I see the strength of the women's community, borne of feminism and the rejection of male oppression and committed to developing more participatory models of community away from mainstream values.

I also see the emergence of a wholesome male community, rejecting traditional male roles and moving beyond isolation, healing the wounds of paternal abandonment and violence and coming together to find new ways of relating to each other and the women and children we love.

My vision is that the conscious men and women of this community can come together and meet as equals, developing our common ground and celebrating the unique gifts we each have to offer.

I believe that we are moving into a new phase of human evolution, recognizing and taking responsibility for the full complexity of our lives and experiences, from the animalistic shadow parts of ourselves where we wallow in the depths of our souls to our divine essence which guides and inspires our highest understanding and compassion for all life on earth. From this understanding a new culture is emerging and we are charged with its co-creation.

I believe that this unfolding of the next part of our journey is coming not a moment too soon for the Earth and the survival of our species and that we cannot fail to reach our destiny. It's going to be the ride of our lifetimes.

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