

ADAPT

Only now, at the end of my life, after writing books and essays for half my life, it dawns on me that I have a problem communicating with modern humankind. I see another reality. Perhaps because I grew up among indigenous people very long ago and then, half a century ago, met and got to know so-called primitive people, I find it normal, no problem, to think of adapting to whatever situation I find myself in. Being content with what is.

The people who can read what I write—literate, civilized—live in a world where it is assumed that we, humans, have the power to change the world. Not only have the power, but it is the first thought that is on top of all thoughts: they cannot live without doing what they can to change the world. Their mindset is that progress is forever and any comment or suggestion that progress cannot be forever attacks their hope. And without hope they cannot live. Hope that they or someone else will do something to make things better, or at least keep things as they are now.

The last sixty years have demonstrated that we do have the power and the will to change absolutely everything. The lives of the privileged have been filled with gadgets, gimmicks, and ease. We know ourselves way ahead of the rest of the world that suffers under our roughshod exploitation of their resources. Those of us lucky to have been born in a white skin living in a favored country think we own the world. We live as no emperor of any past could have dreamed to live. We are served by a myriad machines, houses with bed- and bathrooms for every person and one or two for guests, we travel the world for adventure and profit. Profit is the key word of this extremely asymmetrical world. The few live entirely separated from, and ignorant of, what we used to call Mother Nature. Nature has become background scenery, a place where you go to relax and swim in oceans from white sand beaches, from where you send cards “wish you were here.”

Wherever this idea has taken root it creates a new minority that indeed achieves this new life style, ignoring the ravages to nature and the destruction of the livelihood of large segments of a population. I hear some say things like “those who moan about losing jobs and/or homes are not worth worrying about.” One lady who will run for the US Senate, explained that the people who lost their jobs (many millions) were spoiled, unworthy to have jobs.

From my point of view all this progress, changing the world, has made an awful mess of our planet. We have changed the face of the earth; we have removed mountains, redirected rivers, covered the earth with concrete and asphalt and made too much stuff intended to be thrown away, non-biodegradable plastics. We build buildings that reach the clouds. If we, humans, have proven anything it is that we know how to use power. Force. Blind to the destruction and not a thought for the morrow. And what strikes me more than anything is a deliberate not wanting to know about other ways of living.

What was strongly brought to my attention only recently is that the idea of not accepting this new life style based on always better is *unthinkable*. Young people

write me, I can see what you mean about the state of the world, but what can I *do*. Of course I cannot know what you should *do*. I'm fairly certain there is nothing you or I can do. But, before, it did not occur to me that doing nothing is unthinkable in the modern world. The many books I've read and documentaries I've seen tell what is going on carefully, as if this is all in some not too near future, and it always ends with what we can ought to do. The idea of not doing anything is not acceptable.

As I read the latest report from scientists who measure climate or the destruction of the biosphere it is only too clear that it is way beyond what any one person, or a group of protesters can do. The Powers are using all the immense power at their disposal to keep things as they are because it is profitable. Immensely profitable. For the past few years, in this recession that is really a depression worse than the one 80 years ago, wealth has flown up, the rich have grown very much richer (20%, 30% richer than they were a year or two ago) while the so-called middle class is melting away. The US prided itself a classless society, with only middle class people. Even working class people were called middle class in the last century. The poor and homeless were a problem.

I think that the idea that we are different and that we can (and therefore must) change the world started more modestly maybe ten thousand years ago, when some people invented agriculture. Rather than find food where it happens to grow, we could grow it ourselves, nearby. One thing led to another. Where we made the effort to plant a food crop became something we "owned." The idea of owning was unknown until then. It is an uniquely human idea, it does not exist in nature. Animals will protect their young, perhaps their territory, but it is not owning. Offspring grows, territories change boundaries. Humans expanded on the idea of owning to own their children, own their wives, own a house and other property. And we expanded on the idea of hierarchy: the owner has more power than what or who is owned. Men are more powerful than women. The more property one owned, the more power one had. We could own other people. There grew a hierarchy of owners, more power.

And then we invented money. Primitive scratches in bark at first, then pieces of stone, metal, later pieces of paper, today money is no longer anything other than numbers in computers.

What we know of human history is very sketchy and not very good because it is written after the fact. When we began to rely entirely on written history it became how the past made the present. The State of Texas is rewriting history to promote a current idea about how today should be. I suspect that oral history has always been more accurate because people who have no written language have better memories; we who rely on written records never trained our memory. What we do know is that through the centuries there have been civilizations, empires, around a few people who owned great power. And we know that no empire lasted more than a few hundred years because they used up the resources close around them, food, minerals, trees, water. Today a few interlocking international corporations own

almost all the resources of the planet and therefore own many governments.

Change is natural, progress is not. This time the planet is talking back. A tsunami can destroy a low island. A fire can destroy a forest. But the forest will grow back in time, the island may emerge from the ocean again. The earth will survive our depredations in time. The figures scientists collect and model to imagine a future strongly suggest that the temperature rises may be more than one or two degrees Centigrade—with each 1° C we lose 10% of the food we grow. A 2°C increase will lose 20%. Our human population is still growing. You make the connection. Water is already a problem. The source of all the great rivers of East Asia is the ice and snow of the Himalayas, and as everywhere on earth, ice is melting, disappearing. There is no doubt that the problems that are coming threaten human survival.

Polls show that perhaps more than half of Americans do not “believe” in climate change, and so feel no need to do anything at all. Most of the rest of the world (95.5% of all humans) not only believe but already experience changes.

What can be done, could be done, is reduce carbon emission by stopping to burn oil and coal to generate electricity, stopping the destruction of rain forests. That is not happening, and has not happened in the thirty or forty years since we knew what was being done to the planet, our only home. Carbon emission is still increasing, rain forests are still being cut down. The chance that we will stop climate change is nil, zero. The chance that we will slow it down is minimal. *What is left to do is adapt.*

Adapting to major and likely sudden changes will be local. Our economic system now is global. Adapting to the changes brought by that economic system based on extracting and burning carbon will be entirely local. The global economy is unprepared and unwilling to facilitate local adaptation. So, what is ahead for all humans is an increasingly unfriendly planet, a planet we no longer know and must learn to know from day to day in order to even imagine how to survive, and more than likely ineffective or even antagonistic governments. Not “nice.”

To me, needing to do something to keep our own little world from collapsing is hiding, unreal. Now I reluctantly accept that thinking about our demise is as unthinkable as thinking about our own mortality, and that seems to be unthinkable to many people. I must be weird to be able and accept with equanimity that I am not going to live forever. My life has been a series of shocking changes in suddenly different environments that required great efforts to fit into. I learned early to live from day to day, as all ancient people did. I learned to adapt, to be flexible in how I lived, I do not fear, I accept what is and what comes. What else can anyone do?

And strange as that may sound to many people I have hopes. My hope is not maintaining my nice life. My hope is knowing the interesting and beautiful qualities my species has. We can be cruel, greedy and power hungry. I am appalled at our love for guns, our racial and other prejudices, our shortsightedness in not considering consequences of inventions. But we, humans, have almost unlimited abilities to love, to care, to cherish what is natural. My hope is that the alive qualities will

blossom and the destructive will dissolve. I believe that if some humans survive it will be the Meek, the simple living aborigines I knew, the poorest of the poor who survive in today's slums without electricity, adequate food, shelter, clean water, waste disposal, but always life, living, nature. To me the chaos of nature is my life. I cherish that it forces me to adapt daily. And when I die that too is natural.

Our need to create order is unnatural. We humans cannot ignore, or fear, the chaos of nature, or try to control it. We can no longer do what is unnatural. There are no straight lines in the real world. One and one is two only in mathematics; in nature one and another makes three or many. When you live on an island you know the horizon is not a straight line but a circle all around where the blue of ocean meets the blue of sky. Our poor ocean where all Life began now getting more acid, fished out, may heal in time. Volcanoes will continue to make new land for a long time yet. And I sincerely hope that whoever and wherever you are you will rediscover the fascinating, beautiful, exciting chaos that is nature untouched by human hand. Nature can be found in a potted plant, a wild rat, a tree that grows in the middle of a city, with a patch of moss on the north side, insects who found a home in a hole, a fungus... Nature is Life is Nature. Life not as "my life time," which is just a tiny thread in an always spreading, changing tapestry, but all Life of this planet, And I cannot believe that we are the only planet in an unimaginably huge universe to have what we call Life. It must be a product or an aspect of all matter/energy in the universe. One day, in a less utterly materialistic civilization, L must be added or fitted into Einstein's $E=MC^2$ — and that, of course, is a whole other story.

Have a good day.

robert wolff, mid july 2010