

"A Modest Proposal"

We live in a time of lies. The Media have taught us that advertising slides into propaganda undetected. The Media demonstrated that a lie, said with conviction and repeated a few times, becomes accepted fact. We accept that where there is smoke there must be fire. Oh yeah? It's enough to invent a smoke machine.

And yet we humans are more confused than ever. We drown in the lies from the right and the left, up and down and sideways. Nobody knows what to believe anymore, so we seek refuge in the voices of the people who we think are like us, or pretty, or rich, or... As the financial system that blossomed the first eight years of this century, based as it is on fictions about illusions, greed, and confusion, we don't know who we are any more. Pollsters talk about "demographics" by which they mean slices of the total population that are supposed to think alike, have the same prejudices and preferences.

I have no idea what demography I fit in. Do you? My skin is called white, although it is very visibly red. Not even pink, but bright red. My parents were Dutch, my mother Mennonite, my father racially a Jew, but religiously nothing. I grew up in a very small town in Indonesia. All my friends were shades of brown, from the light beige of boys and girls who had a Chinese forefather or -mother, to dark brown of kids who had ancestors from one of the many "tribes" living in the interior of Sumatra. I was often the only "white," so spent as many hours of sunlight as I could in the sun. I became as brown as my friends. Now I pay for that with many of the skin diseases there are.

Once, on a plane from Singapore to London I sat next to a very beautiful Chinese woman. From Singapore, I assumed. My assumption was wrong; her speech was high Oxford British: born and raised in England, this had been her first trip to "the Orient." She said, "I feel like I am white in a yellow skin." I laughed, because I was going to say I have a white skin but a brown soul. Now, many years later, living in several countries, and getting to know people all over the world, traveling a few million miles, this is what I discovered. *We* are everywhere. Mixed people, racially mixed, culturally mixed, mixed up... Or, to say it another way, there are very few pure anything people left in the world.

When my boys were in school, here in Hawai'i, one of them asked me with some concern, "What are we, really?" I was not sure what he meant. He clarified, "You know, all the kids in my school are Japanese/Korean, or Samoan/Hawaiian. We are just haole?" Haole is a Hawaiian word, which originally meant stranger, visitor, now used almost exclusively for white, "Caucasian" (isn't that weird, that white skins are supposed to come from the Black Sea?) I told my sons that we were haole, but my mother was Dutch and Mennonite, my father, their grandfather, was Jewish, and it is probably almost impossible to find Dutch people who do not have a grandmother or great grandmother from one of the colonies, people who were black, brown, or a mixture. My son was much relieved. That is what all of us are by now: mixed. Pure whites are a minority in the world, and probably in this country, if we were honest about our ancestry!

Hawaiian, and other languages, have more than one word for 'We.'

There is we: you and I.

Or: we, all of you and I.

Or we, but excluding you: for instance, we old men when talking to a young man.

I want to add a fourth WE, meaning you and I and everyone else in a larger "demography." Like, we, humans-regardless-of-skin-color-shape-or-color-of-eye-hair-income-customs-religion-age-gender-ethnicity and other new and useless words.

We confuse ourselves when we try to be nice and are careful to say African/American, Eskimo/American, Latin American - or am I now supposed to say Latino? How about Estonian/American, Burkina Faso/American. All it does is emphasize differences our culture tells us to be aware of.

On another trip I was the last passenger running in with my carry-on, the steward closing the door as I stepped on board. The plane was small, less than a hundred people, and as I looked up I did not see any empty seats. Looked again, there was an empty seat way in the back right next to the toilet. Oh, and a little down the aisle another empty seat. I stowed my carry-on and sat down. The stewardess was telling us about the oxygen emergency system, a story we have all heard a hundred times, I smiled at my neighbor who looked back at me angrily, it seemed. He said, "Why did you choose this seat?" Before I could even answer, he said, "It's because I'm black, isn't it?"

My first reaction was "Oh, are you?" but I did not say anything, just smiled.

But he wouldn't let go. "I'm black, you know."

"Yes, you told me."

"Isn't that why you sat here?"

"Why would your blackness have anything to do with where I sit on an airplane?"

It took a while, the whole trip I remember, but we parted friends. We still are, when one of us thinks to send the other an email. How are you these days?

The big thing today is the collapse of banks, and the election, of course.

Some banks are rescued, or bought by our government. Where do they get the money? Guess they print it. Some banks are bought up by other banks. The stock market goes up one day, down the next. We are all trying to figure out what is happening. I have heard and read dozens of explanations of how sub-prime (that means not quite absolutely first class) mortgages, sold by greedy salesmen to people who could not possibly pay the mortgage for an overvalued house, caused all this. But of course there is a whole system behind that. It seems that those s-p mortgages were then mixed in with "good?" mortgages, then cut up in pieces and sold. The theory being that, yes, there may be one or two perhaps doubtful mortgages, but the good mortgages will cover them. Like, if you have rotten food, you mix it with good food, and then put the mixture in small cans that you sell. The idea is that "chances are" a buyer will get mostly good food. But, of course, sooner or later — and that is now.

Then I read somewhere else that really what drives the whole — now global —

financial system is based on credit, or "liquidity," and something the writer called "valuation." Here's how I understood what he wrote. You buy an idea, or a plan to do something, or something that does not exist yet but probably will. With borrowed money. Then you turn right around and sell that non-existent-yet idea to someone else, who probably also pays with borrowed money. You make a profit, without using a penny of your own money. And then, just in case, you insure that non-existent-as-yet project for a billion dollars. That's really clever, isn't it? A clever illusion, because the whole bundle of transactions is based on nothing. Zero. Zilch. The clincher is that now the Government buys the whole package of illusions from the bank in real money, and we, the people, will pay it for a few generations.

The article ended by saying something like the whole world-wide financial system is an elaborate web of imaginary values tied together with illusionary expectations. As long as everyone keeps his mouth shut and plays the game, there is profit. Enormous profit. The sky is literally the limit. But, at a certain moment, one of these imaginary values turns out to be less than the bank says, a lot less. And there are not just a few of these s-p mortgages but hundreds, thousands, millions. Other countries have invested billions in these global pieces of paper based on thin air. Did you notice that in the last eight years we have lost the word million? Everything now is counted in billions. Pretty soon it will be trillions (for Americans a billion is a thousand million, a one with nine zeroes; a trillion is a million million, a one with twelve zeroes).

The second big thing that is happening of course is "the" election. That too, seems more and more spun of cobweb thin words that rarely mean much any more. To tell the truth (my truth) I don't know who these people are any more who so desperately want to be president and vice-president of this country that, as I see it, is in more trouble than it ever has been in its short two hundred and some years. This candidate is for the way things are; but tomorrow he says, no, the way things were is wrong. The other one moves to the middle when there is really no middle to move to - the whole equation has moved so far to the right as to be almost off the board.

I don't like what those who supposedly represent me have allowed to be done in my name. I never wanted any war, not even against terror (that is another of those air words, "war against terror"). How can you make war, with 3 trillion dollars worth of airplanes, bombs, people, humvees, tons and tons of oil, against an idea? And it seems terribly evident to me that my government had many more hidden agendas. We almost certainly, I think, wanted our hands on what oil there will be when China and India start demanding more and more oil for their exploding economies. That is today, actually; not a future. I am appalled by our callousness here and elsewhere. Are we proud of being the nation with the most citizens in prisons? Do we think we are wonderful when we execute people who perhaps were innocent? How do we make it feel right to torture anyone, friend or foe? After half a century of carefully establishing a world-wide, and world-accepted system of justice, we throw it all away without so much as an explanation. What did I allow to be done in my name?

I have felt a difference even here in Hawai'i, which always has been a very mellow place. I've lived in Hawai'i for more than half my life, and I am an old man. For a

long time we used to think of ourselves here as having what the Tourist Bureau coined the Aloha spirit. Aloha, means hello and goodbye, and love, they said. It does not really mean love as "in love," but for instance love of the land, love for the ocean that is so much part of our reality. We used to smile when helping someone. Bank tellers smiled, police officers were pleasant and relaxed, we helped each other. Driving, we used to slow down so that someone could move into my lane before me. Not any more.

A few years ago all that changed. What changed is the sudden interest in buying land here and building houses that nobody asked for. The price of land increased five, seven, eight times in two or three years. The price of houses shot up, twice, then three times. Planeloads of "investors" descended on us to buy land, sell it six months later for double or triple the price. People from California - that is what we call them - moved here, bought a house sight unseen (from the pictures in a real estate brochure) for \$300,000 to find out that yes, there is an acre of land, but it was clear-cut to build the three bedroom two bath house, all air-conditioned, of course. On an unpaved road, no piped water: you have to catch your own from the roof and filter it somehow. Fifteen miles from the nearest town that is not much of a town, on roads that are now so crowded that you have to plan your time of departure very carefully if you want to be able to sneak into a tiny break in the solid car-to-car in the single lane highway that runs into a divided double highway halfway to town. We have to drive California style now, we say: never give up your place in line, at all cost prevent someone to sneak in front of you. When there is a sign that says the right lane is closed half a mile further on, California style drivers speed up in the right lane, so that when they come to the barrier the rest of us really have no choice but to let them in.

We, and here I mean we, the people who lived here for at least ten or more years. miss that Aloha spirit. It is today's heart disease: our hearts feel squeezed by new ways and customs that do not fit who we are.

Today I was thinking about all of that. We can't go on, like this. Of course, we can't. But the problem, or problems, is/are way over my head. I cannot understand the airy-fairy of modern capitalism. What is a billion dollars? Why would someone who has somehow gotten his hands on a billion dollars want to invest, or earn more? If he just stuck it under his mattress, buried it under a rock, he can take out ten million dollars each year for a hundred years -- and who lives that long? I'm sure you can live on ten million dollars a year (tax free, it is not earned, nor invested) very, very well.

And I am confused by the ferocity of a man not that much younger than I who talks angry in a soft voice words that are all over the map but when you look at them they really mean almost nothing at all. What does conservative mean to politicians? All I can connect to the word as it is used by American politicians is that they are against beliefs and individual behaviors that have nothing to do with what I think is the function of "government." Against gay marriage, abortion, against Islam but for Christianity, against socialism, which they seem to define as caring for poor people. They're for the flag, of course, the army, airforce, navy, marines, everybody must have some guns. They're for the death sentence. But then this candidate says he is

in this not for himself, but for us. How, what, who?

And his running mate, who could be the famous one heartbeat from the presidency, is against "pork," although she's done miracles getting pork for her projects: millions, many millions of dollars. They must be lying, but they do it with such enthusiasm that the Media repeat and repeat and some of us must think ... What *do* some of us think? Or do we think at all?

The other day I met someone I know, but not well. She squinted in the sun and said, "You know, that other guy, he scares me."

"Scares you, why? He seems a likable guy, nice family, has done some really good things I can relate to." And, I thought, but did not say, he is "mixed" as the majority of humans are today! Instead, I stammered, "How are you scared?"

Well, she could not really find the words. Finally she sort of burst out, "Can you imagine *her* in the White House?"

"Who, the veep?"

"No, the other, the..." (whispering, "She is *black!*").

I wanted to step back at least a foot but controlled myself; you have to be "nice" in these situations. "Yeah, she is black. You live in Hawai'i, surely you must be used to seeing people of all colors."

"But a black in the White House!"

I suggested the White House be painted a bright shade of blue, with red trim.

Later, when I could not get that brief exchange out of my head, I thought perhaps our problem starts with always having to be "nice." One has to be nice with strangers, with people you don't know, not trust, are afraid of. We have become so estranged of each other that we feel we must be very careful not to offend another, so we make them feel good. Salesmen talk nice, they are taught that, even though they often aren't nice at all. They lie and cheat to get our business. And although we know it is a thin veneer, we desperately want to believe she or he really is nice. So he sells us insurance we cannot afford or need, a crazily overvalued mortgage with payments we both know I cannot meet.

I decided I cannot go on this way. I must touch ground, feel the real earth under my feet. I cannot live in the upper layers of the atmosphere where all these glorious ideas and gambles are happening, so far up in never-never land that nobody can see them, or even know what it is all about. The only thing I can think of is to be utterly honest. I must not lie, even to myself. Especially not to myself.

Then, always, someone says, *But, there are wonderful people in the world who do wonderful things.*

I don't doubt that for a minute. But what does that have to do with how I converse with the lady who is scared of a part black man? I would have liked to invite her to meet some black friends. After all, she tried to get me to come to her church. That time too, I was nice, and said I would think about it. She would be shocked if I told her what kind of spirituality I am deeply immersed in. Nothing subversive, I assure you. I strongly believe, as the native Americans believed, that we, humans, are just like other animals, part of Nature, part of All There Is. We are not better than other animals. I'm not even sure we're smarter. Oh sure, we can imagine and then make things that never were before; we can dream realities that never were - what does that say about us?

All it says is that **we can imagine.**

That, I have come to the conclusion, is the only real difference between humans and other animals. We share the same chemistry, very much the same DNA, we breathe the same air. Life eats Life; we do, animals do. We eat other animals to live. We eat plants, that eat sunlight and air, to process sunlight and air for us. The only difference that I can think of is that we can imagine things in our heads that never were. We can imagine mathematical formulae that cannot be (the square root of minus one, for instance). We can imagine a financial system that is spun from imaginary gold in imaginary space with illusionary values. We can imagine something we call democracy - we say it means one thing, but in fact it is something entirely different. We imagine good and bad that have little to do with my survival, but with ideas about how I and others "ought to" be.

Once, half my life time ago, I met and got to know, a small group of "primitive" people, barely surviving in the late middle 20th century. Not surviving very well, because their jungle was being eaten up by a modern government that had grandiose plans to plant millions of acres of what had been rain forest in rubber trees and oil palms. There was something about these people that got to me when I first met them. Here were people who were truly human as all of us were, once upon a time. Without lies, without nice, without worries, without government, without hierarchy (men were not better than, or owners of women), who knew themselves part of nature. It took me a while to figure out that what I felt was a connection with my own deepest roots. This is what humans were. This is what I am, at my roots.

They were nomads, meaning they did not plant anything. They ate what grew around them, and when most of the food they liked was gone, or not ripe yet, they moved on a few miles further into the jungle. They hunted with a blow pipe and small poison arrows — but rarely. They did not own anything; after all they must carry to a new location what they cannot do without. That meant they must find what they need at the new location. Bamboo grows everywhere in the tropics, and it makes a wonderful little hut on stilts. Totally biodegradable, less than a year after a small group of the People have moved on, you could barely tell that there had been people living there. They knew nature intimately, of course. They knew it as well as their own bodies, because it is their body, they and the plants, animals, trees around them were not different, simply different aspects of the same Whole. A whole that is One.

Once a little girl who was leading me through paths only she saw clearly, said "You can't see the animals that are watching us, can you?" I admitted that I did not. "You will," she said.

It took me many, many years, but now I do.

The People did not "work," they spent their days in a dreamy stroll, digging up a root here, plucking a ripe fruit there, singing little songs. They always left something of what they ate in the fork of a tree, or on a branch. "Maybe someone else is hungry," they said. And the someone could be an animal as well as a human. They dreamed, and learned from what fragments of dreams remained when they woke up.

And they could not lie. Just think: Nature cannot lie - ask anyone who has ever been at sea in a small boat; ask people who have experienced hurricanes, earthquakes. You cannot pretend the sun shines when it rains. The idea of saying something that was not true had never occurred to these gentle people; it was literally unthinkable.

Of course they knew that I lived in another world; and I knew that they lived in their world. But for some reason we accepted each other exactly as we were. And so they changed my life. Their life, I knew, was real. Utterly, totally real. The kind of real all primitive, some indigenous, and very poor people all over the world know. We, who live in so-called civilization, have forgotten what real is. We live an illusion, a bad dream, slipping into a nightmare.

Ever since I met who called themselves the People, I have attempted to live as they lived. Now, I live with plants and animals that I love and I know they love me. That sounds strange to a westerner, but if you are around plants and animals you know when a plant is happy, when its leaves are shining, it is growing, blooming, giving fruit. You know when animals are content. There is not much wild life on these islands, and nothing bigger than wild pigs (actually feral pigs). But the uncounted chickens who live here and the six ducks and some cats and dogs, are pretty wild. They don't sleep in coops, or in our houses — certainly not in my bed! They come and go as they please. They hang around here because they want to. If they didn't they would go somewhere else.

So, these days I lead a double life, and I don't like it. Most of the time here at home I am outside, or sit on my outside porch, or walk around, breathing the scent of plants and animals, talking to this or that plant that I admire for growing so well in a place where I know there is not much soil. Outside I live totally in the here and now, as they used to say in the sixties. In that life I cannot lie, I cannot be nice, or angry, or even sad or happy. I just am.

But there are also times when I have to drive to the village to buy food, to mail something at the post office. Nice enough village, nice people, most of them know me by name, a friendly superficial knowing. But nothing compared to how I know the one white rooster that lives here: we truly *know* each other. He knows I deplore his sneaky aggressiveness, and so he tries to trick me. I try to trick him. Sometimes he wins, sometimes I do. That's as it is.

I was going to propose something. Now I cannot think what I can propose that would merge my two lives together. And I know from deep in my heart and soul, that unless we — the big WE: all of us, humans — WE can only survive as a species if we can somehow find that primitive soul in us that craves to be one with all there is. Not better, not worse, not even very different at all from all there is. Somehow, we must learn to handle, deal with, that awkward ability we have to imagine. We think ourselves creators, but blind ourselves with how special we are, how different, how superior. Better than: white better than colored, men better than women, young better than old, rich better than poor. Come on, people, we cannot be *better than* in a world where everything is connected to everything else, a planetary ecology. We may imagine ourselves better, but look where that has gotten us...

So, here's my proposal. Let's imagine that we can no longer lie. Imagine that we can only think and talk what is evident, what I experience. Imagine that we can very well do without an awful lot of things and practices we have become accustomed to (addicted to). We don't need alternative fuels to carry us hither and thither; we would be a whole lot healthier (and happier!) if we walked. Or make our roads into bike lanes. I can grow vegetables here (I do well with that) and you, a few houses down the road, maybe make a shirt I can exchange for some beets.

In my aboriginal life I know I am in a neighborhood. There are not only plants, trees, animals, lots of lava, rocks, but also people around me. And I must include the ocean that is not far from here, and all around this island, in my awareness of What Is. But a government? Where did that imagination come from? A country? Who draws those lines? And quickly it gets out of hand. Industries that make things nobody ever heard of before, but we are told that this is going to help us live better, or cheaper, or easier. Next year we cannot do without. We are told that everyone has to have a phone pasted to her/his ear 14 hours a day so that s/he can... What exactly do we talk about? I don't have TV, don't read newspapers, but I have the internet. What do I do with information about the latest horror in Africa? Or what he said, or she accused, or the other denied in an ever uglier election campaign. Yet, unless I make an effort to talk to neighbors I have no idea how the neighborhood is doing. What is happening with the house across the road from me that has been empty for more than a year? How to find out?

For quite a few years we were told we absolutely needed a pickup, well, a truck really. And we could have four doors and five passengers, and still have a truck bed stuck behind. Or we absolutely had to transport seven people, and they had to be entertained with DVD players for each of the two rows of seats behind the driver. And we needed an air-conditioned house with a minimum of four bedrooms and four bathrooms, or maybe five bathrooms, one outside. And the same people sold us on the idea that when you buy an acre of land that land is yours to do with as you damn well please. They ("developers") cut all the trees and shrubs that finally, after a few hundred years, found some cracks in the lava. Then they let the bulldozer "rip" the lava into big blocks, drive over and back until the big rocks are

smaller rocks, more or less flat. Then a few large truckloads of crushed rock are spread to make it like a flat floor. Then you build a house, always facing the road, regardless of where the sun might be at noon when it is hottest. The house, of course, must obey the building code from the state of New Hampshire, although this is Hawai'i, and this island is in the Tropics. The real estate agent who sells you the property says "Now *you* decide where you want a tree!" And you are nice and smile, forgetting that it takes any tree more than fifteen years to become a tree, even here. For a few years that flat acre of crushed rock will not even grow grass.

None of that can be in my world. I have learned that clear cutting so much land changes the weather here. We used to get much more rain than we do now. The weather people explained to me that a green forest attracts rain, flat bright surfaces send rain clouds up and away. We used to think ourselves lucky to be on the rainy side of this island, now we have a more-or-less drought. Other Hawaiian islands suffer a D3 drought (something like a Hurricane 3).

That is what civilization has done to our planet, the only home we have.

robert wolff © september 2008

Note: The words "A Modest Proposal" appeared in my head as I was thinking of a title for this little essay. I know there was another "modest proposal," although right now I cannot think what it was, who wrote it, when. But I remember that it was not at all modest, but very much to the point. That is exactly what I want to say. Unless we are able to leave all this wasteful living behind, there is no future for Homo sapiens (wise man). Unless we can be honest about who we are and how we fit into the planetary ecology, we cannot survive. It is not complicated at all. It requires honesty, take off the blinders, see what there is.

Imagining we must have an economy of always more, more jobs, more wealth, more things, more speed, is an illusion. We are deceiving ourselves, and that is not only not wise, it is stupid.

Above all, remember, **WHAT THERE IS IS ALL THERE IS.**