

NOTE: a newer and clearer version is called
what if man is not in charge

REALITIES 4

Almost 35 years ago I gave a talk, called Realities, at a university. I was professor at that university, chairman of a department. The audience was whoever wanted to come. Some of my colleagues were there, students, others from campus. Questions came even before I had entered the room. Realities, plural? Yes, I'll explain.

Even then I must have used words like "thinking differently." It has taken me a long time to understand that some people don't, perhaps cannot, understand how we can think other than how we think.

We rarely think of the fact that our world, our reality, is manmade. We live in a world of laws and governments (on many levels), of buying food and shelter, of companies and corporations, of money. We are entertained and perhaps informed by people. We know that politicians make the rules, and today we know that politicians are bought by Big Money. It is a world we, humans, made and therefore it is we who must fix it if something goes wrong. I know this because over the many years that I have written books and essays I have received hundreds of nice letters and emails from people who wrote that they really understood my view of what all is going wrong, *but what should I DO?*

Our reality forces us to think in terms of I, we, humans fixing what humans have wrought.

I am weird, as one of my sons once said, because I see a different reality: I see that humans have interfered with the planetary ecology, and that the planet is now changing. Much more rapidly than we can imagine. But I also see that I, or you, cannot "do" anything about a change that is out of our hands entirely. Yes, I can live my own life as frugally as I can. I can write about global warming and the rapid decline of biodiversity, but those are processes that no individual, or even government, can do anything about any more. For the past few hundred years what we call the Industrial Revolution, and for the past sixty years capitalism, have poisoned the atmosphere, the soil, and water of this planet. We have changed the surface of the planet and are still digging deep under the surface to get the last bit of oil and coal out of the planet to generate the energy that drives our extremely profligate so-called civilization. Yes, a remarkably small portion of humankind has done that, but the damage can no longer be undone, or repaired.

What we have forgotten, or what we deny, is that we, humans, for the first at least 100,000 years of our being human it never occurred to us that it was our job and responsibility to create a world. We accepted that of course we were part of the planet as it is, as it was. Our talent was to adapt to whatever environment we found on our grand dispersal all over this globe. When we found ourselves in a world of snow and ice we made shelters out of snow and ate an all meat diet – but we ate all of an animal, not only muscle meat as we do today. In other environments we survived by eating no meat. We made shelter out of whatever grew where we were.

We never questioned that nature, the natural environment, determines reality. A few thousand years ago we changed course. Amazingly, I think, we began to think of ourselves as so special that we were different from all other Life. We did not

have to accept our environment as it was, we can and so we must change nature to please our very whims.

So, what is "reality?"

All reasonably-biologically-within-average-norms children will, somehow cobble together an "I," attached to a name, probably a gender. Over the years, they construct an idea of "reality." Each person's reality includes all that is known and familiar, ideas, descriptions, background, people, at least parts of culture as expressed in language, local dialect. This reality each person constructs depends of course on what is in her or his environment. What kind of people are her parents? Are they religious, busy, loving, strict? Are they like the neighbors and other people? How does he fit in with other children his age who go to the same school. How does she feel about who she is in relation to other kids and adults. This reality grows until it (usually) freezes into a sort of permanent reality in middle age. Until then we add ideas and (culturally accepted) situations, relationships, ideas, we get from TV or movies. Of course, most of us also learn sooner or later to adjust our personal reality to the realities of those we live with, work with, are friends with.

Even in one country there are many different environments for children to construct a reality from. Maybe at home they speak one language, and in school another. Maybe they live in a poor but almost rural area but school is in the industrial part of the city. How are parents accepted in the community? Who are their friends?

Today it is all too obvious that in this country, and many others, there is no shared reality any more. We are split in a hundred different ways.

Now imagine a girl born and growing up in one of the many slum cities attached to enormous cities around the world. A little more than half of all humans live in cities today, and I am quite sure that a good portion of that half is living in a severity of poverty never before known. The first thing she experiences, the first element of her reality, is that there is no what we call privacy. Not felt as a lack, of course, but accepted as obvious fact. The girl's mother (maybe there is a father but very possibly not) lives and sleeps in a little hut made from cardboard and odds and ends of tin with eight or ten other people. From the beginning her "I" must include knowing that life is chancy, surviving a daily problem.

Soon enough she must include in her reality that she is illegal; no birth certificate, no record that she exists. The single 20 watt bulb in their hut runs on electricity that is illegally tapped from the city. There is no toilet, as we know it. Perhaps a gutter that you have to step over to get out of the hut. The gutter sometimes, but not always, flows human wastes and other odds and ends to somewhere else. There is never enough to eat. But people survive, they care and look out for each other. There is no leader, but there are many people who know things, who have skills. Many of those skills we would not recognize, certainly not as skills. The reality of this girl, her thinking, her idea of who she is and how she fits into a larger world, is very different from ours.

Then imagine a boy born and growing up in one of the countries of Central Africa, in the desert. Imagine a boy who is brown, getting darker in almost always sun. He

grows up in an oasis. He goes through the same learning to be an “I” with a name, but much more sketchily. There are few humans around, and an I is less important than We. He too constructs a reality. The ideas of the people around him have very different ideas about “child rearing” than we have. They let children find their own path. These children learn from humans but they learn more from nature around them, because that is what all humans there rely on and are closely involved with. He probably learns to plant and care for whatever grows in a desert, learns to take care of animals (goats, camels) at a very early age. As soon as he can walk, he learns to look for and avoid snakes, scorpions, and other poisonous life forms. He is intimately connected early in life to the seasons, drought and rain, piercing sunlight, cold winds. Dark nights and of course no electric lights.

When that boy grows up he thinks of himself as part of desert life. His I is not much ego, more a We. What I he has is not very different from other male I's.

The western child experiences puberty, say, at thirteen or fourteen. But different western children will experience it very differently. Many of them learn to oppress these strange new urges. The slum child and certainly the desert child experience the same biological changes but with few or no oppression. Sexual feelings and sex are part of life.

Note that the reality of the western, civilized, teenager is almost entirely human-centered. The desert child's reality is almost entirely nature-centered. The slum child's reality is human-centered but a very different human. Packed together, oppressed, barely able to survive and very obviously and consciously a human who is not accepted by more privileged humans.

Of course today there are many more than three kinds of realities. I chose these three to make a point.

I think it is important to understand and be very aware of these different realities because our reality determines how we think, what our fears and pleasures are, what choices are available to us.

Westerners can only choose between human-centered solutions. What can we, humans, *do* about this or that problem. Even if the problem now is the planetary ecology, we are conditioned to think in terms of what can *I, WE* do.

A non-Westerner's first thought might be “yes, some humans' interfering is what brought about this or that disaster. Let's step back and stop doing.”

The Maasai boy's, as well as the slum-raised girl's response would be “how can we adapt to a warmer world, how can we adapt to storms, droughts, floods.”

Westerners, I have learned, *cannot* think that. To Westerners whatever the problem is, we, humans, must do whatever we can think of to make the problem go away.

Today's problem is way too big to go away.

Civilized people cannot imagine that there is anything we cannot solve.

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For forty or more years I have tried to explain in many different ways that thinking ourselves the boss, the owner of this planet – thinking ourselves all

powerful – is simply not true, not realistic. It is arrogant. It is not smart and not real. We are not the boss of this planet. Planets cannot be owned by one species. In fact, the whole idea of owning is wrong but that is another story.

The first thing we must DO, I and most nature-centered people think, is to admit that we cannot control nature. We are not supposed to control nature.

In fact, we would be a whole lot happier if we stop controlling any kind of Life, our own, our children's, our neighbor's. We survived as a species the first more than a hundred thousand years by adapting to the environment as we found it, adapting to our fellow humans. Only in the last few hundred years have we come to think we are in charge. We are not, we cannot be, we never were.

Yes, we are clever. We can invent weapons that weekly get more lethal. We can mix chemicals that kill what we don't like but we always forget what that might do to our own health, our survival.

We are clever but not at all smart.

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To conclude this rambling plea, as I often conclude similar rambling pleas: let go, flow with the flow. Give up the need to control, it is unnatural and it does not work; it never has worked and cannot work. Yes, hard times lie ahead, some of us will adapt to that. Others won't make it and die. There is nothing unnatural about dying. Life is not possible without death. Death is a natural aspect of life.

Look around you and find someone who just enjoys life as it is with its itches and pains. Get to know someone who smiles, who is joyful when the sun shines because the sun shines, and equally happy when it rains because plants and trees need rain. We all need rain and sun and wind and the occasional storm. And when it does not rain for a month, or two months, we'll deal with that when it happens. We put ourselves in tight cages when we live by calendar and clock.

Oh, I know there will be people, maybe many people, who cannot help but say "but..." Learn from the Maasai boy, the girl who grew up in a slum town. It's the meek who shall inherit the earth. Not the rich. Not we who think we must fix the economy before we think about global warming. Not the super-hyper rich who buy our rulers. What they inherit is a shredded, distorted, abused world they made for themselves. If there is "hope" (a four-letter word) it is the 99% all over the world. Without leaders, without a program, except *change everything*. We are taking back our humanity, the dignity of being.

We can choose our reality, you know. You don't have to be as others want or expect you to be. Be yourself – hard enough for anyone. Accept others as they are, as you accept a tree to be just that kind of tree. Adore your children, all children, and accept their idiosyncrasies. Admire a bougainvillea for its gorgeous flowers, and accept its needle-sharp inch long thorns.

Enjoy the now; essentially that's all there is.

robert wolff, 2 february 2012