

Our Good Minds: The key to making peace with the earth

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Friday, 21 October 2005

Given the unbounded curiosity of infants, the constant probing and experimentation of toddlers, and the natural delight humans take in learning there seems to be enough evidence to suggest that the inherent human relation to the natural world is one of curiosity and attention to all its wondrous details. This is, no doubt, one of the reasons for humanity's success (so far) in learning how to thrive in nearly every ecological zone on earth.

Human intelligence appreciates order. Most of the thousands of cultures that have survived on Earth up to now have done so by learning the patterns of energy flow, life strategies and ecological relationships of a particular place or region, and adapting its livelihoods and economy so as to nourish itself and protect the ecosystems on which it depends. In the relationship between humans and our environment, our attention and intelligence are the most important natural resources we have available. Through what the Onondaga people, my neighbours and teachers, call the "Good Mind," our encounter with Nature changes from fear and ignorance to peace and understanding. According to their teachings, the Creator has given every being an original set of instructions. Green plants transform sunlight into food and make medicine, the winds carry the rains, the moon guides the cycles of fertility, the berries bring forth sweetness and nutrition and feed the birds who do their job and on and on. We too have original instructions from the Creator and our task is to cultivate our minds, to observe carefully and with respect, to learn from the ways of each being and perhaps most importantly, to give thanks. True gratitude requires reflection, it is an impulse that arises from true intelligence, from an understanding of the improbability of survival and an appreciation of the extraordinarily complex set of relationships that make our life possible.

Our intelligence is our ability to recall and learn from the past, perceive and assess the unique circumstances of the present moment, imagine and predict likely futures and then act on the results of our forecasts to promote our survival and well being. True intelligence is inherently pro-survival and pro-human. It has little if anything to do with what is measured by so-called Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests. IQ measures a variety of cognitive skills that people may or may not use intelligently. It has even less to do with military intelligence, the gathering of information in support of power. Human intelligence, the Good Mind, is the capacity our species has evolved for detailed attention, understanding, experimentation and creativity. Human intelligence is the name we give to our ability to take in information through our senses, to be aware of what is outside us as well as our internal feelings and thoughts, to distinguish between emotions and rational thought, to be able to focus our attention purposefully, to distinguish past, present and future, to process information and to make rational choices based on the information available to us and our understanding of its meaning. Intelligence operates in levels allowing us to perceive what's going on in our own minds, in other words, to be able think about our thought processes while they are happening. Intelligence makes it possible for us to decide to act on our ability to think even when fear, addictive pulls, despair and other emotions urge us to act otherwise. Moreover intelligence is inherently social. It thrives in the company of other intelligent beings.

With our full intelligence intact, we would look upon all the complex orderly relationships in the environment such as water cycles, ecosystems, nutrient cycles, mutualism and synergy and see beauty. The world we are part of is the evolutionary outcome of ecological forces driven by a powerful striving and will to live. Ecology and evolution is a process of continuous interaction and improvisation in the service of survival. For intelligent creatures, nothing could be more fun. Recent genetic discoveries prove what we already know, that we are deeply connected to all of life. We share hundreds of the exact same genes with flowering plants, bacteria, weasels, and shellfish. We get to think and experiment with how to make things go well in the world around us. That requires that we have lots of free attention and a commitment to making choices based on rational thinking. As humans we are, as far as we know, the only creatures with intelligent foresight. We can actually foresee danger ahead and plan to avoid it and we can set goals and achieve them. With new tools we also have the ability to learn from the distant past in ways no other creature possibly could. The warning signs of impending environmental catastrophes are everywhere evident and we now have the chance to make decisions collectively to choose a better future. This is why the reclaiming of our intelligence, the healing of our intelligence, is so important for the healing of the planet from the multiple scourges being unleashed on the planet by the industrial growth society.

Intelligent beings constantly take in information, evaluate it, act accordingly, monitor the results and change our behaviour if and when we learn that our actions/our behaviour is counter-productive to our wellbeing and future survival. Because we are social as well as intelligent animals, our wellbeing depends on the health of the community as a whole and of the ecosystems from which we draw our sustenance. Human intelligence never flourishes when it is focused solely on personal achievement, nor when we analyse things in isolation without accounting for the web of relationships

in which we and the thing we are analysing are involved. Our intelligence, our “good mind” is our guide in the continuing relationship with our community and our environment. When humans act self-destructively by undermining community or compromising nature’s ability to sustain the life-supporting environmental conditions in which our species has evolved, it is a sure sign that human intelligence has been damaged, hurt in some way. To stop and then reverse destructive forces unleashed on the planet by our ignorance, it is essential that we uncover how this damage occurs and how it can be healed. Without the distresses from emotional damage to our intelligence, we would, I propose, be naturally attentive and curious about the world and its incredible design. Our feelings would be characterized by gratitude at being alive at this time and place surrounded as we are by incredible beauty and order.

Any society whose ways of life undermine the ecological basis for its own wellbeing is doomed by its ignorance. Since this is clearly the situation of the modern global economy in relation to the biosphere it is essential that we uncover the source of that ignorance soon so we can go about the business of healing from whatever hurts have damaged our intelligence and caused humanity to become so self-destructive. Ignorance is a deep and profound hurt that is not “natural” to human beings. No one chooses ignorance any more than one would choose any other injury. It has to be installed against our will and against our own interest. The name for the process that injures our intelligence is oppression. It is fair to assume that none of us gave in to oppression without putting up a fight. Reclaiming our full intelligence is partly a matter of reclaiming that rebellion. Oppression arises from the tragic alliance of power and ignorance. It reproduces itself through social institutions. In evolutionary time scales it never lasts long because it is inherently self-destructive. Oppressive societies may spread and grow for many human lifetimes, but they always collapse. During their rise and fall they do enormous damage to the Earth and human intelligence. Past oppressive societies unleashed ecological violence in the territory they controlled. Today the threat is global. Opposition to oppression is always pro-survival in the long term, whether or not the results of that opposition can be witnessed in a single lifetime. The most significant act any human being can take in opposing oppression is cultivating one’s own intelligence and assisting others to do the same.

Damage to the functioning of human intelligence can result either from physical or chemical brain injury or by emotional injuries suffered during early development. Physical damage can occur early in life from abuse, neglect, or chronic lack of nutrition and stimulation. Chemical injury can be caused by poisons ingested in contaminated food and exposure to neurologically active compounds in our air, water and soil. By far, the greatest damage to human intelligence results from emotional and physical mistreatment that occurred when we were first learning where and how to focus our attention and engage our intelligence. The greatest gift a child can receive is when our teachers, the adults around us, focus their loving attention and intelligent caring on us. This kind of loving attention is like sunlight and nourishment for the developing mind. What is parental love but exactly that intelligent attention beamed in one’s direction. Every parent has tried her or his very best to provide an environment conducive to the development of their child’s intelligence. Parental failings to foster a child’s wellbeing came not from their intention but their confusion, the ways in which their intelligence had been hurt. This is the great tragic cycle of history and the way oppressive societies continue as long as they do until their inevitable collapse. Children whose intelligence has been hurt grow up to be parents who act in unintelligent ways resulting in the hurt of their children. Every parent fights hard against it, just as they fought hard as young children when they were being hurt, and often are able to lessen the hurt to their children. In this way, healing occurs over generations even as hurts are passed on. Emotional distress results from these early hurts and has the effect of pulling our attention away from fascination with the outer world and other humans and turning us inward in an ongoing repetitive exchange with ourselves and others that reflects the way we’ve been hurt.