

The Modern Hunter-Gatherer as Monk

A Far Future for Indigenous Knowledge

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Some people see life as many steps up and try to forget where they are coming from, you understand? A little step in life on a commercial or a material level is a good step, but a big step does not mean a strong step, you tend to lose your roots, and if you don't be careful, you can fall.

— Winston Rodney OD (also known as Burning Spear)

At the end of a recent prostate exam, my doctor asked me—as a kind of return to normalcy gesture I suppose, and this being near the end of October—if I was a hunter. I said no I'm not. And don't get me started on what I think about human beings pretending to be predators!

Well, it turned out my doctor wasn't a hunter either, but the expectation of “normalcy” behind this question speaks to the depths of our animal past, and it too easily dismisses any misgivings we might have about the future of hunting in a world of escalating “weaponry”. In fact, given what we now know about the undeclared war of humans against Nature, I like to think there was a deeper discomfort, perhaps even a subliminal desperation, behind my doctor's innocent gesture.

Not long ago, the need to fundamentally question the rights of a man, with a gun, in the bush, would not have been so obvious to me either. My father and my older brother were the hunters in our family (though they were quick to point out they hunted for food, not sport) and I was often the one who did the gutting, skinning, and butchering. Every fall Dad and Terry would go into the bush, just after hunting season (because the deer were still restless, and it was safer), and they'd bring home a hundred pounds of venison for the price of a bullet. For them, that was the only real challenge. All this seemed to make sense when I was young, and even to be somewhat noble. In fact we had, and still have, many neighbours, friends, and family among the Anishinabek, on and off the two reserves in our area, and I was brought up to understand the spiritual importance of the circle of life. And so now this is exactly where my more informed evo-ecologist's understanding of the *difference* between human hunting, and animal predation, disturbs me at a personal level.

I have proposed a somewhat radical view of humans and Nature elsewhere,¹ and the practice of hunting seems to have, on first view, no place in any future the casual reader might imagine from this perspective. Essentially, the argument is this: that technology, at least at our advanced and ever more rapidly advancing level, puts us outside the reach of ecological self-regulation. This is simply because ecological self-regulation is based on the principle of *competitive exclusion*, also known as “one species, one niche”, a well-established principle that, among other things, assumes all co-adapted organisms will remain structurally consistent throughout their lifetimes. (The idea that function and structure play different roles in evolution goes all the way back to Darwin, who proposed that structural change only comes about in response to a functional shift; that is, there has to be a certain degree of *ecological disturbance* for organisms to adapt physically.) A stable ecology simply does not “allow” an organism to change its body structure willy-nilly, for if it could, the whole system of Nature would be in upheaval. Alarmingly, most ecologists now agree that this is exactly what’s been happening ever since technology freed human beings from the constraints of competitive exclusion! In fact, recent research suggests that even the relatively unchanging toolkit of *Homo erectus* might have been, at least partly, responsible for an early decline in African megafauna.²

I won't present the full argument here, because the problem I want to address in this document is not an ecological, but a social one. I am painfully aware of the implications of this “extremophile choice” view of our human future for many indigenous cultures; cultures that are, by definition, grounded in a very long tradition of living “as one with Nature”. This troubles me especially as I think about the many young people who suffer the physical and psychological effects of historical disadvantages; and who, as a remedy, are being encouraged to re-engage with and reassert traditions that seem to support the sustainable harvesting of wilderness. Ultimately, as a life-long student of ecology, who believes in a very different kind of future (where we choose to think of ourselves as adaptive extremophiles rather than as supreme opportunists), I would rather encourage a new generation of indigenous youth to engage with technologically sophisticated methods of “containable” human development (greenhouses, stand-alone power plants, etc.), and I would even submit that this extremophile strategy is ideally suited to the very conditions found on remote reserves. I also can't help but think it would be especially appropriate if those cultures that benefit least from mainstream corporate economy, and that have the deepest connection to

our human origins (giving them treaty rights to vast expanses of undeveloped land by the way), are also the first to get on board with this view of our human-natural future.

That said, for the purposes of this writing, it is a sociological solution to a social problem that I want to put forward now.

Without getting into the details of the Extremophile Choice philosophy, I can offer a less technical, more intuitive, reason to be optimistic about the future of indigenous cultures. We can start with the simple truism that no philosophy of humans and nature, and in fact no believable vision of the future, can be complete without acknowledging the need to stay in touch with the past. Revolutionaries who forget this essential ingredient of change, change nothing essential; and yet, unfortunately, it's in the nature of revolutionary or even liberal thought that when we want things to change quickly, desperately, this need to stay in touch with our roots is the very first thing that gets overlooked.

But “staying in touch” is not easy when the past is painful. This became obvious in a recent news item related to the abolition of slavery. How does staying in touch work for a change that was, in hind-sight, an unmistakable good? We wouldn't want to see the culture of Southern slavery reinstated even on a small scale, would we? But should we keep a statue of a slave master in the town square? And would putting a plaque on the statue, saying the institution was all wrong, be the kind of “staying in touch” that supports change? Not quite what I have in mind when I speak of optimism, because I am really arguing that truly lasting change actually requires us to “honour” the past; and the solution here is to recognize that what we need to stay in touch with is our *roots*. Slavery was a perverse hyper-institutional diversion of a powerful, and generally benign, human adaptation: the practical divisions of labour and master-apprentice obligations that sustain the cultures of a hyperprosocial animal.³ Such relationships continue today: in the home, in the school, and in the workplace. In fact, if anything about our modern recalibrations of this fundamental root is disquieting, it is that a tendency to lose sight of our more wholesome instincts in their bureaucratic abstraction, together with the impersonal nature of modern media, is threatening to undermine the truly “social” contract—where one person gives over a level of control to another so the culture at large can benefit.

In the big picture, I suppose you could argue that the master-slave relationship is not a bad metaphor for a technological species that takes from an already balanced ecosystem without

giving anything back in return. However, for the immediate argument, where we are comparing the abolition of slavery, in the nineteenth century, to the question of hunting today, the former turns out to be a relatively superficial case of altering our relationship with the past. The roots of hunting go much, much deeper than our hyperprosocial instincts—which may have evolved as recently as 164,000 years ago.³ Our adaptations to hunting, which evolved with *Homo erectus* two million years ago, show up today in the human body itself: in the structure of our feet, legs, hips, wrists, arms and shoulders, which are adapted for endurance running and for throwing torque in the application of stone-headed spears to kill less methodically persistent prey.⁴ So it is this depth of our adaptation to hunting, against the shallowness of technological history, that provides the key to unpacking the problem we now face. *Though the evolution of our bodies required a million or so years of relatively stable functionality, our behaviour, coupled to technology, began its hyperbolic elaboration only about a hundred-and-fifty thousand years ago.* What does human hunting mean today, ecologically, when we use high powered rifles with scopes? What will it mean fifty years from now when supremely un-Natural hunters enter the bush with flying drones, sophisticated sensors, and heat-seeking projectiles? Can we really pretend there is a future for this kind of hunting? Can we keep deluding ourselves that there is an ecological niche for us, among other co-evolved animal strategies, which taken together might resemble an authentic, self-regulating, ecosystem?

This is where the hope of a more “as one with Nature” environmentalism loses its believability: with the disparity between human and Natural scales of adaptation. Are we to imagine that current attempts to rejuvenate hunter-gatherer traditions will, with Amish-like religious determination, forego the use of technological advances? Given what we know of human curiosity, this seems unlikely. Even by around thirty-thousand years ago, with the atlatl, we had gone well beyond the wielding of stone-headed spears to secure our Natural “game”. (Other species do not adapt nearly so fast, even behaviourally, as demonstrated by common reports of white-tailed deer seen hanging around human habitations during hunting season. This would be strange behaviour indeed, unless perhaps they are instinctively seeking to avoid a Naturally co-adapted enemy, the timber wolf, who is even shyer of humans than the deer is?) And consistently, inevitably, we’ve been changing the self-regulated flourishing of wilderness into the human-managed productivity (i.e. lower diversity) of narrowly selective agriculture.

To imagine our future in *deep time*, we need to start thinking outside the humanized ecosystems box that most environmentalists are currently trapped in. If the phylogenetic Mother Tree (a planet-full of co-adapted species) is to survive, we must look boldly past our short-term calculations of probability, upset our self-serving fantasies, and think in archaeological and evolutionary terms to find a believable future for both humans and wilderness. And so I too will reverse myself here and suggest that we might call upon religion after all. But we must also step outside the greater box of mere “belief”. Religion at *its* root is more than just a narrative system that serves to re-ligate the believers (literally, ‘hold us together’) conceptually; and we might do well at this point to recognize that it is the *ritualistic* arm of religion that actually keeps us “in touch” with our common humanity. I propose we look here to find a future for our inner hunter.

So how would hunting as ritual differ from hunting as livelihood? Would hunting-gathering activities still be “culture”, once we admit to, and thereby remove, the evo-ecological misconceptions we use to justify them as a “normal” means of human subsistence? To get a sense of what this evisceration of a cultural norm might look like, we might consider the dynamics of Zen Buddhism in Japan. Counterintuitively, meditation *practice* is less common among the populace in Japan than it is in the West; and yet, in contrast to our Western reality, shrines and orange robed monks in Japan are everywhere in evidence. You could argue that this is just because the cult of “individualism” here in the West requires every person to be as independent, some might want to say as “well-rounded”, as possible. But this individualism phenomenon is indeed more cult than culture, and mostly espoused by Europeans in “the New World”. In fact, human beings throughout most of time and place have preferred the Japanese, not to mention the Native American, model of interdependence and traditionally assigned social functions. The presence of Zen monks in Japan demonstrates that the root of culture is healthy, and so keeps the everyday choices of laypeople in touch with this root. It keeps their feet on the ground. The monk’s “formal” practice is just that, a moment to moment confirmation that something real stands behind religious forms. These practices are not expected to turn the wheels of human industry directly. Just so, the practices of a mindful hunter-gatherer, not directly involved in the everyday economy of *Homo extremophiles*, might counterbalance the top-heavy bureaucracies that inevitably accompany deep cultural changes such as I am envisioning here.

Imagine a small “hunt camp” of Anishinabek “monks”. But in this scenario, their “reserve” is meant only to contain hunting-gathering activities so they do not disruptively humanize larger tracts of true wilderness. It is not meant in any way to confine their activities within the human sphere. (In essence, what we have here is a shift from the paradigm of “rewilding” conservancies within a technological world, to that of technological reserves within a Natural World. I’ve argued elsewhere⁵ that this is the only long-term practical way to ensure species conservation in the face of human political caprice.) Their numbers shouldn’t be greater than necessary to support the monastic purpose within this larger human sphere, but the membership should ultimately be, also in response to that purpose, as open as possible. And again, for the larger purpose of re-minding (and at a deeper level, re-embodying) the many levels of lay culture, the technology of our hunter-gatherer monks will naturally revert to, at the very least, pre-European levels. Notice also that none of this monastic affirmation need subtract from the broader Anishinabek culture—which, in the absence of subsistence hunting, in adapting to the latest non-invasive subsistence and outreach technologies, can modify or retain any social elements it likes.

Crucially, we must expect that our small hunt-camp will require a far more rigorous discipline than we generally find among modern day hunters—Anishinabek or otherwise—both in its religious and in its ecological duties. The hunter/monk himself (or herself; human sexual dimorphism is not so complete, nor even so consistent, that womb-men do not experience some general adaptations of a hunter’s body) must be as committed and well trained as any religious devout. But beyond this basic requirement, the hunt-camp/monastery should also be available to guest/retreatants (and the test of admission might be as stringent as any Zen monastery) who then might experience, and reaffirm in a direct way, their original interconnectedness with Nature, along with the deepest truths of the human body-mind.

It is an inevitable consequence of technological history that the primal life-and-death intimacy between men and other animals can no longer be experienced today in a complete and coherent way, except perhaps through the many and varied Nature religions of aboriginal cultures. It is no small matter for species conservation then that these cultures are themselves losing their integrity. But the matter goes the other way too, and touches human issues well beyond these beleaguered communities. By putting Natural Religion at the center of cultural regeneration, the ever-increasing tameness of modern life in general might yet regain its roots. And then also, our inner warrior, who campaigns at the core of all human enterprise, will be less

likely diverted on to confused and destructive paths. Perhaps in this way, since proper healing is always universal, and since our special kind of healing—by which I mean *adaptive* recreation—must always follow from very mundane restructurings of “normality”, a larger healing might follow from the healing of colonial wounds.

Knowing who we are is the most powerful motive force in our cultural pantheon, and so the proper future for human kind must be courageously tracked, and be brought into reach of our most clever devices, before the futures of all those other beings, with whom we co-evolved, fall into permanent shadow. This future may begin to materialize just like any Paleolithic phantasm of mere claw-mark, broken twig, or stinking scat: as the upright stalker takes his characteristically deliberate and progressive steps in the calculated direction. Perhaps just by redefining one of “man’s natural rights”, so that it no longer obscures his newly acquired ecological emancipation, nor denies his subsequent displacement from that co-evolved wilderness we constitutionally mistake for a “garden”, our proper future might come into focus. We might begin simply by reimagining the modern hunter-gatherer as an ecological guest in that primordial wilderness. Not a shallow thief, plundering shrinking patches of once thriving wilderness in the shadow of Man, but a deeply re-mindful monk, in a Natural world that is re-wilding beyond our ever-changing, but increasingly contained, technological enclaves.

References:

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