

Sailing to the Moon

"What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves?"

Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, ©1960

Isn't that true? Our modern world is busy, complex, dangerous. If you were to ask who we were, we would answer, We spend our time, energy (money, power) on doing, inventing, making things, selling, promoting, forcefully convincing others to become like us--and while busy doing, we have no time, or inclination, to remember who we *are*.

We worship Change; Progress, we call it. Has Progress lost us access to our selves?

In the world of News, this year has been a succession of calamities and scandals. Eight judges fired, and not at all clear why, but it seems very much like dirty politics. Walter Reed hospital--a model of advanced medical science--was found to make life difficult for patients sent there from our wars in the Middle East. Now we learn that the number of casualties of those wars is not only three thousand plus deaths, but 23,000 wounded and severely wounded men and women. Our leader waxed enthusiastic about ethanol, made from corn or soy beans. The research has not been done yet, we don't know whether burning ethanol (mixed with gasoline) is any better than burning oil, but we rush ahead anyway. But then, ethanol is not forced on us to save carbon. It's meant to save importing oil; so, instead, we import ethanol from Brazil. We invade, overthrow a government, we occupy a country we know nothing about, and to our surprise we are disliked! When force does not stop what we call terror, we apply more force. When that does not work, we "surge" with yet more force.

We act for the sake of doing, blind to history that could have reminded us of what never worked before. We modify the genes of plants and animals, knowing full well what the unthinking mixing of living things has done to local ecologies, but apparently not caring what these newly created plants and animals might do to an ecology twenty years from now. We eradicate rain forests, destroy huge areas of land, with never a thought for consequences. Are we crazy?

Sailing to the moon indeed. So busy doing that we forget who we are.

Why should I not be in touch with my self?

Is the person that others see really me? I am very aware of the years and years of being "shaped" by my parents, teachers, the culture and languages of the peo-

ple around me. I did not live my own life until well into my middle age, and then only with continuous trouble and struggles. Our modern world--we call it civilization--does not allow people to be themselves. Our society is controlling, rapidly changing, and with changing ideas of who we, homo sapiens, are. Do we even know any more what, who we are as humans?

But isn't it interesting that in a country that begins to look like a bad dream--Big Brother watching us--there are a growing number of young people who stand up, find ways to express their selves. I never knew what the expression "gird your loins" means. I found out: "prepare and strengthen oneself for what is to come." Cannot think of a better way to gird my loins, prepare for what comes, than to stand firm on who I am. Before I am anything else, I am human.

I know, deep down, and also from knowing people who were thoroughly human (and not civilized) that humans are not killers, we are not racist, we are not dishonest.

True, you can brainwash humans to be a lot of things, as you can train tigers to leap through hoops. But that tiger had been made into a circus performer, not a tiger any more. People can be made unthinking followers, forcefully kept docile, even ruthless torturers. But they are no longer human.

I do not know whether there is one western culture; there probably are many versions of it. But something that all colors of western culture have in common is Education. Westerners expect, and insist, on an educational system that instills, often forcefully, over a period of twelve of the most impressionable years of a child's growing, a state-approved body of knowledge (facts and figures), and a remarkably restricted range of allowed behaviors and thoughts.

Americans, and perhaps other westerners as well, seem to think that Man is by nature tough, strong, aggressive, even violent. I have heard people say, Humans are predators. We are not, of course. For at least a hundred thousand years humans survived. If we had been the ruthless killers some people think we are, we could not have survived. I am convinced that the kind of unbridled aggression we now see all over the world is a new phenomenon; it is not human nature.

It was in the early years of the VietNam war, when we lived on one side of the island, and my work was on the other side. Less than a half hour commute each way, across a beautiful mountain pass. Breath-taking views both ways. I often gave a ride to hitch-hikers; that is how I met a young man who in the half hour ride told me his story. He grew up in a trailer, moving around Texas. His father, an alcoholic, now and then would pick him up and throw him against the wall. At sixteen he quit school, ran away from home, joined the Marines. A few years later he found himself in VietNam. He had a talent for shooting, he confessed. "Almost as if I could not miss," he said. One day, when he was idly strolling through a village they had taken, he found a young child bleeding, barely conscious and obviously in pain. He carefully picked her up and brought her to the

Army Dispensary, where he was told that American medical care was only for Americans, they were too busy repairing their own to deal with the enemy. For him, that word crossed the abyss: "enemy."

There was a long silence in the car, then, "a child," he said, over and over again. He went on in a different voice. "The next day I went to my commanding officer and handed him my rifle." I looked at my passenger. He had both arms out in front of him, palms up, as one offers a gift. "Here, you can have this, I don't want it any more."

The lieutenant said, "Stop that nonsense, boy. You're a Marine. You need your rifle.."

He told the officer that he could not kill any more.

The officer got mad, kept talking, "enemy, enemy," and "we cannot trust them, they are the enemy."

At some point the young man said, *Killing is obscene*.

Then the lieutenant really blew his top, "F..ing is obscene," he had yelled.

The young man turned to me, sounding absolutely certain of himself, "I knew that was wrong, F..ing is natural, killing is obscene."

The Army sent him back to Hawaii for a Court Martial.

That young man crossed the abyss, he found his true self. And the anecdote illustrates how difficult it is to cross the abyss in our society: the consequences test one's resolve.

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Recently came across this story: in parts of Australia wild camels have become strangely destructive, attacking homesteads, even small towns. The article said it was "because of the drought."

Camels were brought to Australia long ago, to do what they do so well in other desert areas. They have the ability to store water so that they can go long distances, even with a burden, across a desert. Today, trucks, cars, and trains are more efficient perhaps, and have replaced the camel. But camels survived in the wild. Now at least some of them are getting wild in another sense of the word. Hmm, camels going crazy because of a drought? Aren't they desert animals? Or, perhaps, severe stresses make them behave un-camel-like.

<The Independent (Scotland) 15 March 2007, by Kathy Marks in Sydney>

Then read a story about elephants, in Africa as well as in Asia, going crazy. Bands of elephants on a rampage, destroying gardens, trampling fences, houses, even people. Obviously not family groups, but a rag tag group of young elephants. That is not like elephant behavior!

The article gave this explanation: poachers have killed so many adult elephants for their ivory, that young elephants (who have not grown big tusks yet) are left to

fend for themselves. *They grow up without mothers and fathers.*

I like elephants. I grew up around elephants (we had a neighbor, who had five, sometimes six, elephants that he would lead through our back yard to the river). I have read much that has been learned about elephants in the last century. They live in family groups, sometimes large, led by the alpha female and her relatives or adopted family. Male members of the family are the protectors. Elephants touch each other almost continuously. Males and females face each other, touch heads. Looking into each others' eyes perhaps. I have seen elephants walk through the jungle almost without sound; elephants can have a very soft footprint. Baby elephants are playful, as all children are, but their mothers watch, and punish when they get too rough. Elephant trunks are an amazing piece of anatomy, it is nose and hand at the end of one very muscular and flexible long arm. The kind of behavior shown by bands (one article referred to gangs) of elephants who obviously were not family, is very unelephantlike. Strange, also, that it occurs in Asia as well as in Africa (different kinds of elephants).

ASIDE. This morning a friend sent me a short, amateur movie of an elephant birth: <http://tinyurl.com/2x5qz5> He accompanied the link with "not for the squeamish." I'm not sure why. It's a birth, like all others, one of the great miracles of Life.

The few minutes of this not always very good movie clearly shows the character of elephants. The mother is literally supported on both sides by her sisters, the male is nearby, all of them in fact moving in a tight cluster around the birth. And when the baby plops on the ground, unable to stand up yet, the movie shows a forest of huge legs (the pad of one leg almost as big as the baby) helping this fragile being to get on his stomach, then to stand up. Breathtaking to see those enormous beasts gently, softly move to get this baby on its feet.

One can sense the feeling, excitement, of the elephants--but it is not hysterical, uncontrolled, as the rampaging "gangs" are.

Yes, there are stories about "rogue elephants." But, I have been told, that most of them are grossly exaggerated and, in any case, rare and always the consequence of great stress to an individual. All hurt animals are dangerous.

It appears that without adults to guide a young elephant for the many years of her/his growing up, s/he cannot learn to be elephant.

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On the internet there are now several searing accounts of young men and women who speak out after returning from Iraq. A young man, trained to be tough, visibly fighting to not show emotion, shaking his head, repeating "I killed. I am not a killer. That is not me!" Another young man, speaking in a hall, keeping his eyes closed as he talks, haltingly, "I did not feel anything," he says, "I don't

know myself any more. I did what they told me to do. Shoot." After a long silence, very softly, "Kill." The overwhelming emotion comes across strongly even without words.

Thirty-one percent of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are diagnosed with "mental health and psychosocial problems," many of them with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Almost one third of our fighting men and women come home over-stressed. Individual stories emphasize the disorientation and confusion people feel after having been inserted into a modern war on the ground.

In modern wars many more civilians than warriors are killed or otherwise affected. How do civilians cope? How must the now more than one million Iraqi refugees feel? What of the refugees from Darfur's ethnic cleansing? How do children grow up when parents and other adults are ill, perhaps disabled, from stress?

Now and then I have wonder about the Chinese, who invented gun powder, but for centuries used it only for fireworks and noise makers. It evidently never occurred to them that it can be used to kill and destroy. Westerners discovered that. Our modern world could not do without any more.

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Many, many years ago I attended an annual meeting of the AAAS, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, publishers of the journal Science. One of the keynote speakers was psychologist, John B. Calhoun. He reported on a study he had done with mice (of course), wanting to learn whether mice have a culture, a society, and what that culture is like. He also was interested in how populations grow--his may have been one of the early studies in demography. The mice would live in cubes, 10 X 10 X 10 feet. with balconies and skyways, stairs and ramps: a model world for mice, with unlimited food and water. I remember (I lost the printed version I had) that he could not start a population with just one Adam and one Eve. I do not recall the minimum number, but it was larger than a dozen, I think. And as they did what mice do, and the population increased along the curve we all have seen, he observed their behavior. The mice paired off, made nests, males and females had different roles. Offspring was cared for. Calhoun observed the communication of mice, with gestures, behavior, the position and direction of ears, eyes, the tail, etc. Then the mouse population came to the point where the curve became an S-curve, flattening out at the top. Remember, unlimited water and food; the external circumstances had not changed. The only change was population density. The behavior of mice changed radically. Female mice became began to neglect their young, became casual mothers, then bad mothers, then eating their young. Males had other new behaviors: tail biting, avoiding females, then avoiding each

other except for occasional males mounting other males. In short, the mice began to behave very un-mouselike, and obviously in ways that would endanger their survival.

As I remember, Calhoun let things happen, and the population "crashed." I cannot remember whether he ended the experiment there--to the best of my knowledge that was the end of his report.

If nothing else, Calhoun demonstrated that population density is a severe stress to a mouse society, resulting in behavior contrary to survival of that population.

That strange mouse behavior came back into my awareness a few years ago when I saw reports (and later experienced) of so-called Road Rage. Or, a school age boy shooting, killing class mates and teachers. Or a mother drowning her children. Overpopulation? Probably not, but overwhelming stress.

What is behind the massacres in Africa, Cambodia, Myanmar (Burma), and elsewhere? That is not human behavior. I am convinced that torture is not human, but yet, now it seems policy of our government. What is going on? What makes my species behave in ways that cannot but lead to its own demise?

What if inhuman behavior has to do with growing up in an inhuman environment? How many children grow up without love, or without at least one parent?

Children all over the world used to grow up in small groups, villages, extended families, where children were treasured and respected as individuals. Now many children grow up with their peers and authority figures like teachers, while both parents work out of the home, ten hours a day. In parts of the world diseases like HIV/Aids, or malaria, or tuberculosis, have killed so many adults that children grow up alone, or in orphanages. Societies are torn apart by wars and revolutions. Child soldiers.

What distorted view must children get of who they are.

The abyss is no longer a personal barrier to knowing one's self, but now seems to be a phenomenon of our civilization and the excesses it breeds.

Of the six and a half billion people now alive, millions, probably billions, feel stressed, overwhelmed by wars they cannot understand, by poverty, hunger, fear. Many of us must feel the threat of our globalized economy, a capitalist system that strongly favors the rich and powerful, making the majority much poorer and feeling abandoned.

Global Warming is a threat. Even though we now know that we are causing the poisoning of our atmosphere and the resulting warming of the planet, a growing number of us sense that the survival of our species might be threatened.

The planet is in trouble; of course we feel that. .

Over the years people have told me, "you are too negative; there are wonderful people in the world, who do good and human things." I know. I know many of those wonderful people.

However, I have come to think there is an enormous wave of happenings, rolling over us, moving toward a great catastrophe. Climate Change is now a fact, and is upon us faster and greater than foreseen even a few years ago. And, suddenly again, fears of a man-made atomic disaster are with us. A seeming inability of governments and people to think of anything other than stay the course and more force, more violence, secret prisons, and torture as accepted ways of gathering information. All that could threaten our survival as a species.

People behaving in ways that are not human any more.

A thousand species of beings are disappearing each day. Our civilization, so-called, is destructive, not sustainable. Even if we were to change fuels, it is still unsustainable. Our way of life is unsustainable.

And, I think, that those of us who have any sensitivity left, must feel that.

In the United States, the most prescribed medications are antidepressants. We are like the camels, the elephants, the mice, going berserk when stressed, even when the stress is created by our own inhuman behavior.

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I find it impossible to consider that Earth would be the only planet in the universe with Life. There must be forms of Life everywhere; and thus self aware Life. Perhaps, the reason we have never been visited by sentient beings from other planets is that no race can survive an ability to see itself as the owner of its planet.

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And yet: seeds.

in this apocryphal landscape there are individuals, groups of individuals, communities, and blogs, little youtube movies, newsletters, books, and voices that remind us, call us, yell and scream at us: Remember what it is to be human! Cross the abyss, our true selves are still there, waiting to be needed again. What is real about us is not our ability to make war, nor our ability to make money. What is real is our ability to live and let live, to survive as part of an ecology of living beings, *everything connected to everything else.*