

## REALITIES

There are times when I ask myself why I am so obsessed with what I think of as my "message." It is a perfectly simple message: Fellow humans, wake up, we are going the wrong way.

Obviously that is such a weird idea that people cannot hear me. How can there be a wrong way? After all, we are here, now. Man is what he is today. Yes, twenty, two hundred, two thousand years ago we were different. And we were raised with the idea that we are the end product of an always improving evolution. We are civilized, we have a trillion gadgets, we fly around the world. We walk on the moon. We are the masters of this planet. I know people who believe we are the only life in the universe.

That kind of thinking is strange to me. Perhaps because my growing up was different. I grew up in a place and at a time when the general idea was that we were as we had been for quite a while. People around me recognized that some things had changed from the old days — and most of those changes were "bad," unpleasant — but we had refined ourselves. And perhaps the most important idea that I grew up with is that change is a choice. We must carefully weigh the possible advantages or disadvantages. We should be careful not to change too much all at once. That would be confusing, "dizzying," It was a good way to grow up.

From that world, at age 17, 18, I was thrown into western Europe at the threshold of world war two [I dislike capital letters]. A great shock. The most advanced cultures of the mid twentieth century putting enormous energies behind killing each other. Civilization, so-called, at its worst. I tried to get away. The only place I could think to go was America, although I knew less than nothing about this country; I knew its geography, States and Capitals, Rivers, Mountains. I got a visa easy enough, but all ships going that way were booked at least eight months ahead. The war caught me in the Netherlands. Five years of Occupation by a nasty, violent country, They were eventually bombed out of the game, with the help of the power and might of the United States the second half of those five long years.

After the war we, survivors, tried to put behind us the death and destruction, the always mounting pressure from above, the hunger of the last six months, an empty, plundered country.

Again five years later I was allowed to come to the United States as a student. The U.S. was the second great shock of my life. Growing up I always had an affinity for people at the bottom of the heap. During the war I experienced what it is to live smashed under a heavy boot. Nobody had told me that in America black people were shut out from large parts of society. I can still feel what I felt when I was told that a dentist and his family had an auto accident. Two ambulances had to go to three hospitals before these black people would be admitted. Now, sixty-nine years later, we have a "black" president (his white mother does not count?), and the response of numbers of the American people has been to stock up on guns and ammunition.

But I stayed. I was determined to adjust, become an American. Understand this culture, go nuts over football.

Ten years later I have a dream job, a model family, we lived well; everybody healthy and happy. My job sends me and the whole family to Southeast Asia for research. My research was, as a Brit put it, to find out *why people eat what they do and not what they should*. In Malaysia we were probably no more than a hundred miles from where I grew up — across a narrow ocean, in another country. But the same people, same language. In twenty years not much had changed. Indonesia and Malaysia were recently independent, but my focus was still down rather than up. Politics meant little to me. Governments change; life in the villages had not changed much from the life I knew.

I met a small group of First People, Aborigines.

Something in me awoke. I recognized in them my deepest self: our, my, human roots. They were as we all were a long time ago. I have tried to write about what happened in me, but the best description I found is from another: Peter Matthiessen, famous travel

writer, in his book *The Tree Where Man Was Born*, © 1972. Matthiessen is on a short expedition, with a friend, Enderlein, in East Africa. By chance they meet five "pygmies:"

...Shy, they await in a half-circle, much less tall than their bows. "Tsifiaqua!" they murmur, and our people say, "Tsifiaqua mtana," and then the hunters say, "Mt-aa-na!" for warm emphasis, smiling wholeheartedly. (Tsifiaqua is "afternoon" as in "good afternoon," and mtana is "nice" as in "nice day." and tsifiaqua m-taa-na, as the hunters say it, may mean, "Oh beautiful day!" I am smiling wholeheartedly too, and so is Enderlein; my smile seems to travel right around my head. The encounter in the sunny wood is much too simple, too beautiful to be real, yet it is more real than anything i have known in a long time. I feel a warm flood of relief, as if I had been away all my life and had come home again — I want to embrace them all.

Yes, that is what i too felt when I met and got to know Aborigines: coming home again after wandering in a strange and dangerous world for decades. I did not speak their language, but at least one person spoke some Malay (Malaysian, Indonesian). We communicated well enough with few words and many smiles and touch. After that first visit to a tiny settlement —three bamboo huts, less than a dozen people: women, men, children—I visited others when I could. Sometimes I went with someone, usually alone.

I learned from them how to live.

I learned what their reality was, the reality of being one with nature, being in the here and now. Really seeing, touching, all life around me, and knowing I am one with all life. A peace of the soul that western people cannot imagine any more.

The People, as they referred to themselves, of course, smiled almost all the time. They sang little songs as they wandered here and there, looking for food. They were nomads, as all aboriginal peoples were. They made dwellings from what they found in their immediate environment. Life had a rhythm that was the rhythm of the earth, and the jungle they lived in. They had no desire to change their world. Why should they? They had no rules, other than the laws of nature. No leaders, no laws, no police, no prisons. Oh yes, they knew what the modern world was like, but they wanted no part of it. They coveted no "things." Sometimes they had an old beat-up pan to cook in, some had a knife, or a machete. Clothes? Yes, some of them wore shreds that may have been pants at one time, but in the Tropics you don't need clothes to stay warm. And when you sleep in a huddle, a tight clump, you stay warm at night. The human body and its functions are no secret to anyone.

Yes, they were "poor" although when you don't use money what does that mean? They did not live as long as we do. But their gravest danger came from diseases they got from us. All over the world these last remnants of early Man have been pushed to the most inhospitable parts of our planet, the places we don't want. The snow and ice of the Arctic, the deserts of Africa, the jungles of the Amazon and a few parts of Asia, isolated islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans we have no use for.

Westerners, civilized people, take one look and have a whole dictionary of words to explain primitive. From eradicate them, to let's give them religion, medicine, democracy and schools. Westerners talk power or compassion (sometimes in the same sentence).

But we, westerners, have forgotten what compassion is.

It is what I experienced when I grew up, and what I experienced from the aborigines. They accepted me as I am and I accepted them as they were. As I accept a tree: different, but I accept it for what it is. I don't see trees as lumber, or an element of a designed garden. I feel myself equal part of a wondrous whole. I don't like to use words like "love" because it has lost most of its meaning. But I experienced being loved unconditionally. Of course I knew and they knew that I was from another planet so to speak, but I saw them as and what they were. They saw me as a westerner, but a human. We were a "we." To me, that is what compassion means. To accept, to be with without being other.

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Of course my family and I returned to civilization, Hawai'i, where I had an even better job. Hawai'i is beautiful, the people are mostly beautiful and mostly pleasant. My job was interesting, demanding. I made money, we lived very well indeed. My sons grew up with the ocean, surfing, sailing. A very healthy life.

And I could not get those Aborigines out of my head. Found the same kind of people on islands where the West had not (yet) put its stamp, and "wild" tribes here and there, I found the same ease of communication without words, the same intimate relation to their environment, the same joyfulness. And the same mutual respect, acceptance of who we were: different obviously, but equal in our humanity.

So I began searching for books, articles, anything that others had written about encounters with First People. I did not find many, but enough to make very obvious that what others wrote about other aboriginal people all over the world, was amazingly similar to my experiences. Every one of those writers mentions that these primitive people were happy, joyful, sang and danced, did not worry. Every one wrote about their intimate knowledge of their environment—actually not so much "knowledge" as being-part-of, as we know our own body. Every one of those writers admitted that meeting those "little people," even casually, had made a deep impression, a resonance with some inner, shared humanity. And several of these writers mentioned — sometimes apologetic, reluctant — what I experienced as well: that those primitive people knew things that they could not possibly know, according to our civilized thinking. Here I'll add just one little story; one of many.

The first author I discovered was Laurens van der Post, South African writer, who has written many books, and in at least three of them he talks about his obsession with finding and getting to know the Bushman of the Kalahari Desert. As most westerners he had to organize an expedition, with trucks loaded with water and fuel, food, machines, Land Rovers, spare tires, guides, bearers, a doctor, a mechanic, and so forth. Somewhere they find a few Bushman. Less than a dozen. They set up their tents close by. Then van der Post writes how three hunters go out. As many aboriginal people they use bow and arrow, the arrows tipped in poison. (In different parts of the world the poison is made from different plant and animal products). They shoot a giraffe, but the poison works slowly in an animal that size, so the giraffe runs away, the hunters run after, Van der Post follows them in a Land Rover. He mentions his astonishment at the ability of the hunters to follow the spoor of one hurt giraffe from among many other tracks in desert sand. Finally, after three days, the giraffe dies. The hunters skin the animal, cut up the meat that they now will have to carry back on their shoulders to where their families are camped. Van der Post writes that it must be at least 50 km (30 miles) from where the giraffe died. He offers the hunters a ride in his car. Three hunters and all the meat and some bones from a giraffe are loaded into and on the roof of the car. As they start out, van der Post says to them, "the women will be surprised when you come back so quickly." Oh no, the hunters assure them, *they know*. When they get back to camp the women have large fires going, ready to cook the meat. They knew.

All this information, and my own experiences, were stirring in my head, while having to live in a world where humans think differently, see themselves-in-the-world very differently; a different reality. ("Reality" defined as the way we see the world and ourselves in it.)

HOW DID WE GET FROM THEN TO NOW? How did Man change from a species that knew itself an integral part of a whole (an ecology) to a species that thinks itself far above all life forms, now judged either useful (food or domesticated to work for us) or useless. What did we do, or what happened, for us to go from a virtually invisibly small footprint to a footprint so large it tramples everything in its path. Man began modest, became arrogant. Scientists call our "rise" cultural evolution. We assume evolution is always improving, always "up." Man is evolution's final glory, we tell ourselves.

But thinking that is essentially different from knowing ourselves part of All.

Why must evolution go *up*? From what I see around me with animals that reproduce in much shorter time spans, nature is whimsical. Nature tries anything and everything.

Nature makes incredible colors, shapes, ways of being. Evolution is as chaotic as nature. And there is nothing wrong with that. It is that chaos, the unimaginable variety that makes the planetary ecology alive.

Civilized human thinks he knows best, and so we can interfere with nature, "help" nature by creating new beings with pieces of other beings mixed in. We create life forms and then get a patent on it. That means we "own" it and so make a profit selling it.

Nature, left alone, also continually creates new shapes, forms, colors, but without intent. Evolution's only "direction" is maintaining as much variety as possible; not up but sideways at odd angles in every direction. The Hawaiian Islands are the weathered tops of undersea volcanoes, far from the nearest continent. It is a long voyage for any life form to find its way to these lost dots in the wide ocean. A few seeds have blown on a storm, insects perhaps also on the wind. A few plants and animals may have floated on a tree stump for thousands of miles to wash ashore on an isolated island. Scientists found that at least one female bird somehow survived 2500 miles in a strong wind probably. Over time, measured in hundreds, perhaps a few thousand years but not really a long time, from one bird species evolved over 40 different kinds of birds, with different shapes and functions, now different enough to be considered 40 different species. I would say "because an ecology needs as much variety as possible to be stable."

We, who think we must control, want to simplify. We have forgotten— or deny — that we are not above, or outside, but right in the middle of all there is. We do indeed have acquired power we think ultimate power. We can force anything and everything to do our will. We think we have not only the ability, but the right, to rearrange nature. We may have the power but we don't know what we are doing. Our rearrangement looks more and more like wholesale destruction. Men have the power to slice the top off a mountain to extract a bit of coal we burn to get the energy to slice the top off the mountain. Consequences? No time for that, we want profit *now*. A few men make up stories that convince others to make wars, enormous expenditures of energy in order to kill people. Wars must be the most wasteful and destructive inventions of civilized Man.

Our civilization imagines it has seized control over nature, and over Man. And then we think all this glory of conquest and riches proves that we are superior and somehow convince a lot of innocent people to believe that.

I cannot feel proud of our supposed accomplishments. I find it hard to imagine that one system of control is better than another, one belief more true than another. It is pure power that "wins" by destroying a million people who believed something else.

But — and this perhaps is the point of my writing against the stream — it is not a matter of belief. It is a matter of how we think of ourselves and our place in the life of this planet.

To me it seems that we, homo sapiens sapiens (aware that we are aware), have lost much of our humanity by a new way of thinking. Our ancient history is not Hollywood cavemen, but simple, modest people who laughed and sang and buried their dead, who made the most incredible drawings and paintings on rock walls 40,000 years ago. True, they did not have one of the many True Religions, but they also did not have wars. They did not rearrange nature; they knew themselves part of nature. How can we be anything else?

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I thought about all that. Talked about it; wrote about it. And gradually, sorting through a lot of information and my own experiences, isolated what I thought was the one, most important, idea that must have changed the world. The difference between us and our far foreparents must have been our divorce from Nature. Our thinking that we know better. Thinking it is we who must "design" a world. As if it is up to us to design worlds.

That was an idea First Man could not have imagined. To him, the world is as we find it, our job is to fit in the best we can.

*“We Indians think of the earth and the whole universe as a never-ending circle, and in this circle man is just another animal. The buffalo and the coyote are our brothers, the birds, our cousins. Even the tiniest ant, even a louse, even the smallest flower you can find—they are all relatives.”*

Jenny Leading Cloud  
White River Sioux

We, modern man, stepped out of the circle.

That is what changed us. And look where it has gotten us today.

Today we think we must fit the planet to our whims. We have found seemingly endless power to do just that. Never worrying about consequences. But it is the consequences of our interference with the planetary ecology that now finally begins to concern us.

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Then, recently, I read about left brain, right brain; I saw a movie. <[http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/jill\\_bolte\\_taylor\\_s\\_powerful\\_stroke\\_of\\_insight.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_s_powerful_stroke_of_insight.html)>

The technical term of course is left hemisphere, right hemisphere.

I have known about the two parts of our brains since I studied at universities, half a century ago, I know how strokes on one side have different effects than strokes on the other. But I never made the connection with the quest of my life — how did we change to what we are now. Our change was not a matter of doing, or learning to do, but a matter of thinking differently.

The following is a clear summing up of what I have read in the scientific papers I struggled through:

### The Left Brain

The left brain is associated with verbal, logical, and analytical thinking. It excels in naming and categorizing things, symbolic abstraction, speech, reading, writing, arithmetic. The left brain is very linear: it places things in sequential order — first things first and then second things second, etc. If you reflect back upon our own educational training, we have been traditionally taught to master the 3 R's: reading, writing and arithmetic — the domain and strength of the left brain.

### The Right Brain

The right brain, on the other hand, functions in a non-verbal manner and excels in visual, spatial, perceptual, and intuitive information. The right brain processes information differently than the left brain. For the right brain, processing happens very quickly and the style of processing is nonlinear and non-sequential. The right brain looks at the whole picture and quickly seeks to determine the spatial relationships of all the parts as they relate to the whole. This component of the brain is not concerned with things falling into patterns because of prescribed rules. On the contrary, the right brain seems to flourish dealing with complexity, ambiguity and paradox. At times, right brain thinking is difficult to put into words because of its complexity, its ability to process information quickly and its non-verbal nature. The right brain has been associated with the realm of creativity.

Left brain thinking describes our current way of thinking very well.

Right brain thinking is a surprisingly accurate description of the thinking of First Man and of many indigenous people.

Somehow we changed to almost entirely left brain thinking, and so we have become murderers that can and will kill any life form, including our own. Not for food, but for an idea, a thought. We kill because they—whoever “they” are—do not think like us; or because we want what they have.

We have lost the ability to think in wholes. We take everything apart, name the pieces as single objects, and believe ourselves exceedingly clever because we are learning how the universe works. We have science. The systematic measuring of what is. And the great majority of us do not know that we are many steps behind the avant-garde physicists and mathematicians who explore realities beyond our man-made reality and have come up with a thinking that is surprisingly like right brain thinking.

Left brain thinking has given each of us an I, and the ridiculous idea that our individual lives are important, so important that many of us, at least in this country, spend fortunes to prolong life a month or two, or even years. When it should be obvious that in the real world of nature it is the survival of a species that is important, and the survival of the planetary ecology is of course the most important. We deny that, or forget it, and may well destroy our own species by our left brain elevation of I, me, mine. There are no I’s in the real world of nature; an alpha rooster is no more important than the one at the bottom; and, from my observation, the difference between alpha and all the rest is minimal.

Modern Man sees “things,” objects, against a background. The natural world we think of as the backdrop of our theatre. Or as unending resources. The land of this planet we see as a thing, property to be owned, bought and sold.

First Man and most indigenous people could not imagine “owning” land. After all, the earth is our mother, of whose essence we are made.

Man, thinking with his left brain only, decided there are hierarchies. If I can own land, I can own my wife, my children, other people. Owning makes men better than women. Some people better than others. Isn’t it obvious that when we invent hierarchies we not only see them everywhere, but sooner or later one man owns it all. One of my favorite authors, Ursula le Guin writes: “Owning is owing; having is hoarding.”

Today, 2009, Modern Man takes for granted that it is up to us to design a (better) world. And because we are now thinking with our left brain, we have created many worlds, because every third person has ideas about what world would be best. Best for what, for whom? Some of us feel so strongly about our particular world that we wage wars against other ideas about worlds. We use our thinking to design more and more ugly ways to kill and destroy. Our thinking designs endless ways to control people, tell people what is allowed and what is not. We designed money, and those who think money designed ever more abstract ways to make more money. And so, the many worlds we designed are split and stuffed into millions of smaller groups, often designed to protest the larger design.

Ancient people always knew that communities are not designed, they grow. It’s an organic process.

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I am scientist enough to remind myself to add that I am not suggesting that different ways of thinking with one or the other brain hemisphere explains why we have changed. But it helps me think about the difference between two very different kinds of being-in-the-world, using left brain/right brain as a metaphor. And, who knows, there might be a physical something that made us change. Let’s say, humans have changed to thinking primarily with their left brain “because” we eat only muscle meat. All other meat eaters eat everything: organs, bones, skin, and parts we cannot even mention!

It could be something as simple as that. I don't know. But I do know that we have changed, we have changed our thinking, and not for the better.

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The path our left brain chose is leading to the meltdown of not just our financial/ economic system but our civilization. The world we have constructed on top of and ignoring the planetary ecology is not viable.

Empires rise and fall. Why worry about the slide of this one? Because this empire, this civilization, reaches into all the last corners of this planet. If we continue to erase a thousand species a day the time is not far in the future that the planetary ecology will be so diminished that it cannot function. The collapse of an economic system (based on nothing but fantasies about illusions) is dreaded by all. The collapse of the planetary ecology is a truly unthinkable disaster.

An economic and cultural system based on growth, MORE, is obviously impossible. There is never unlimited more. Our exploration and subsequent plunder of the planet—our only home—has brought us global warming, now manifesting as climate change. Scientists who measure things are telling us that the changes brought by global warming are happening much faster than originally thought. When we thought we had a century to worry about a changing earth few people worried. When it seemed more likely that it was perhaps half a century, some people began to think about cutting down our poisoning of the atmosphere. The latest figures do not even talk half a century any more, but ten to twenty years.

There is brave talk about draconic reduction of burning coal and oil by burning alternative fuels. Our previous president promoted ethanol. Suddenly everybody grew corn, until the corn market crashed. Ethanol is an alcohol, it evaporates. My miles per gallon have gone down by ten or more percent. Here we have no choice, because all gasoline is mixed with at least 10% ethanol. Another alternative fuel proposed is palm oil. The rush to make palm oil plantations has already destroyed most of the rain forests of Malaysia and Indonesia's large islands. But we seem unable to consider not burning to make energy, or even not needing as much energy as we use now.

Whatever we can think of in left brain mode, seems to make things worse, not better.

We don't think much about the survival of our species; we take for granted that somehow, someone, science probably, will assure that we, the most important species, will survive, and that in the end we will design a world for us alone.

It is very important that we rediscover our right brain to make us aware of the excesses left-brain-only thinking has made us do to Life, to the planet. As long as we see ourselves apart from the planetary ecology, we will destroy it. Man can survive on this planet only if something like right brain thinking redresses our extreme divorce from nature that is a construct of left brain thinking.

I used to think that only Armageddon — whatever that turns out to be — could shake us awake, and then make us rediscover an ancient way to be. I wrote Rain of Ashes.

More recently I am considering that perhaps, as some people say, there is a magic ray that can suddenly open the bridge that already exists between the two halves of our brain. Miracles happen to me all the time. Whether this miracle will happen to one species of this planet I don't know.

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Shifting from left to right brain thinking is not difficult, once one accepts that there is another way to think, another way to see, to be.

I've learned to live in right brain awareness much of the time.  
It is hard to live in two different realities.

The world of nature is all around me most of the time, with plants, trees, flowers, rocks, poisonous centipedes, noisy frogs, sun and rain... here and now. I laugh with the chickens, talk to plants. When I worry, or feel bad, sad, angry, I go outside and all that feeling (that is really thinking) is gone.

It's a lot harder to live in that world of all man-made ideas, boundaries, concepts that very often seem arbitrary, illusionary, misleading. But it is that man-made left brain world that gives me the internet, that web of copper and glass cables that circles the planet. As all man-made infrastructures the net is very fragile, but for now it allows us to talk with each other.

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