Exploring New Ways of Knowing - Preparing Youth for the 21st Century

CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL YOUTH LETTER

Sciences & Humanities ♦ Innovation & Sustainable Development ♦ Technology & Global Bioethics

After Homo Sapiens, What Next?

"Any crisis is essentially a crisis of perception . . . It derives from the fact that we are trying to apply the concept of an outdated world view - the mechanistic world view of science - to a reality that can no longer be understood in terms of those concepts. We live today in a globally inter-connected world in which biological, psychological, social and environmental phenomena are all interdependent."

Fritjof Capra, Physicist

If human consciousness could be said to have a singular purpose, it would perhaps be to instruct us that a species either adapts to its environment or it dies. A glance at the cosmic calendar reminds that evolution on this planet is advancing at an increasingly accelerating rate. A slow and arduous process at first, life eventually manifests itself in a myriad of expressions. Species emerge, experience their brief tenure on the planet, then appropriately evolve within an ever-changing environment or follow other species into extinction.

It is the same for humankind. Homo sapiens enjoys no special status here. It would be arrogant and naïve to think we do. And it would be just as arrogant and naïve to think that we are the pinnacle of the evolutionary process. This is just a stage we are going through. In evolutionary terms, there is either something new or nothing at all in store for humankind. For, like all those homonids who have preceded us and have become extinct, the cosmic day of Homo Sapiens will one day draw to a close. What, then, is the future of humankind? Put another way, after homo sapiens, what next?

Hold infinity in the palm of your hand...and eternity in an hour.

To speculate on such a question, it is important to have an appreciation of where we presently are in the scheme of things. What stage of evolution have we already reached? And how did we get to this stage? We certainly are the dominant species on the planet at this point in time. And at least part of what is involved in becoming a dominant species is to evolve at the rate and in the direction which will maximize survival potential and minimize chances of extinction. In other words, the struggle is in the direction of survival enhancement. For example, at a critical point in time, fins evolved into legs and gills turned into lungs and this allowed a creature to move from the sea onto the land. There is similar evolutionary process with regard to the brain. 3,000 million years ago, at the time of the formation of the Earth's crust, there was not, as far as we can ascertain, anything that was either conscious of itself or of anything else in the universe. Even 1,000 million years ago, when the earliest known life-form appeared, there would not seem to be anything we could recognize as awareness.

But at some point along the evolutionary path, there emerged a creature with the capacity for perception. It may not have been able to do much with that perceptual ability; it probably triggered an instinctual response to attack or to flee. Further along the evolutionary path, a creature appeared who had not only a perceptual ability but also a receptual one. That is to say, there is a low level recognition of a category of something. There's one and there's another one. No words on it, no ideas about it, just a recognition of a sameness or difference. Categories of inclusion and exclusion. But at some further point along that same path, a creature emerged who had not only a perceptual and receptual faculty, but a conceptual one as well. With that faculty, a species can eventually put words on things and have ideas about them. This makes language possible and language makes further abstraction possible until eventually you can have ideas about ideas. And all of this is part of what makes up human culture.

Homo sapiens inherited this perceptual, receptual, conceptual process and currently possesses a triune brain. It is composed of a primitive reptilian brain, a primitive mammalian brain and a cerebral cortex. And the cerebral cortex would not appear to be all that well integrated yet, so much so that if that part of the brain is damaged, a human may revert to acting like a wild animal.

A very interesting thing about this evolutionary development of the human brain is its ability to discriminate, to categorize things in terms of binary oppositions. This capacity has great survival value. For example, at a very basic level, there is prey and non-prey. But as our capacity for abstraction increased gradually over the thousands of years, those binary oppositions came to be applied to more complex and complicated issues so that eventually we have the essential live-giving institutions of human cultures placed in opposition to each other. We get discriminations like capitalist versus communist, Christian versus Moslem, Sikh versus Hindu and Catholic versus Protestant. Things are good or bad, right or wrong. People are high or low, friend or enemy. Who says so? Ideology says so.

Ideology, which is the body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of a group or culture, has served a very useful, even critical, function. It has allowed for the formation of cultural entities - clans and tribes and nation-states. And this is a tremendous advantage over lower forms of life who cannot conceptualize their blueprints for survival and therefore cannot do as many complex and complicated things. So this particular attribute has allowed us to become the dominant species on the planet. Today, however, we are no longer distinct and separate cultural groups; we are one interrelated and interdependent social system connected by a technological global brain. Yet we

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go on reacting to one another with archaic forms of conditioned collective behaviour that enhanced our survival potential as distinct and separate cultural entities. As a result, our different political and religious ideologies are running up against each other and threatening to destroy us all. So now we are in the peculiar position of having to rescue homo sapiens from himself.

On what does the future of humankind depend? It depends on two critical elements: first, an ability to transcend ideology and recognize the oneness of the human species, and, secondly, a greatly enhanced appreciation of planet Earth. In other words, our intellectual impulse must be matched by what might be called a religious impulse. By 'religious,' I do not mean a system of beliefs and dogmas and rituals. I mean precisely those two elements mentioned above: a mind that can transcend ideology and recognize the oneness of the human species, and a mind that has an acute appreciation of the planet. It would be a mind in tune with that of someone like the poet and mystic William Blake:

> *To see the world in a grain of sand,*
> *And a heaven in a wild flower;*
> *Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,*
> *and eternity in an hour.*

Think for a moment what he is saying, 'To see the world in a grain of sand." Which it is and which we are. We are grains of sand grown to consciousness. And a heaven in a wild flower." It took almost 3,000 million years from the time of the formation of the Earth's crust until there blossomed a flower. A flower represents a very long journey on the evolutionary path. And if we could today find out there in that vast cosmos, a planet which had reached this stage of evolution, where there are flowers, we would be competing to get there. We would be saying that we have found paradise. "Hold infinity in the palm of your hand." To transcend all the boundaries, to get beyond all the artificial distinctions that we make.

"And eternity in an hour." To recognize that there is no yesterday and no tomorrow. There is only now - and that is eternity.

Blake's vision transcends the conceptual mode. What word would describe the level of evolutionary awareness that it represents. There does not appear to be one in current usage. Perhaps we might refer to it as 'transceptual.' It transcends the conceptual; it is outside our familiar pattern of binary thinking. And what kind of species would we have if it possessed this kind of transceptual mind? Because it would be something more than 'sapiens' (knowing). It would be a synthesis of the knowing and feeling faculties in a way that we have only been introduced to through a few exceptional people. Again, there does not appear to be a word in current usage which expresses what we have in mind so let us call this species 'homo sanctus.' 'Sanctus' means 'holy.' And by 'holy' I again do not mean the notion of religious as referring to belief or dogma or ritual. Homo sanctus would be a species who have ceased to see themselves over and against an external world. They would be a species so sensitive to life that what they say would be equal to what they do.

We are on the verge of an evolutionary leap. And I think there have been forerunners to this new stage of homonid in people like Buddha, Jesus, Ramakrishna, Mohammed - homonids, incidentally, who are revered as gods. And their composite message has been this: "You want to know the path. You want to know where to go from here so that you can have life and have it abundantly. I am the way to take the human journey. Come and follow me." That has been their message. But the message is hard to hear. Because we do not know how to transceptualize it. We do not enter into that level of experience they disciplined themselves to know. So we conceptualize the message, and when we do that, we turn it into beliefs and dogmas and rituals that turn around and do us in. We reduce the spiritual to the ideological.

It is, as Capra points out, a crisis of perception. We must make a shift in the direction of our look if we are to solve our problems as human beings. We've got ourselves all boxed in, operating within artificial boundaries we create for ourselves. We must transcend those boundaries, see them for what they are, and then maybe we can decide how to have a world. Otherwise, we will destroy both ourselves and our planet. And what a sad commentary on a species that has taken so long to come so far. What shall we choose for the future of humankind? A next stage in the evolutionary process - or nothing at all?

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