

Survival and Humility

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”Every animal knows more than you do.” - Nez Perce proverb

Kāore te kumara e kōrero mō tōna ake reka – Maori whakatauki

(The kumara does not say how sweet he is)

Survival teaches humility. Survival reminds us of our place and teaches us to respect the natural world. Because often we get into the life-threatening “survival situation” in the first place due to a lack of humility. We think our abilities are better than they are. We think we're an expert. We think we're experienced. We think we're tough. We think we're so smart. We think to ourselves, “It's been fine the way I've done things so far.” We take for granted the luck involved. We take for granted that we're nothing compared to the natural world. We're nothing to a mountain. We're nothing to the ocean. We're nothing to the desert. People talk of “conquering the mountain”. That's the opposite of humility. And it's not even true. It's ridiculous. No one conquers a mountain. It's insane to think that walking or climbing to the top of a mountain is “conquering”. It's a reflection of not just an adversarial mindset to nature, but an attitude of domination and control. It reflects the belief that nature is there for humans to dominate and control however we like. This is what our culture teaches us. And just as a lack of humility causes us as individuals to get into trouble, it does the same for an entire society, and now, the species.

The problem is that a lack of humility – arrogance and ego – is promoted and celebrated by this culture. In the media this is not hard to see. Celebrity culture is based on arrogance. (It's also based on the constant need for attention, which highlights the immense insecurity that causes arrogance.) The media focuses on the rich, famous and powerful. Of course, these people are the *last* people we should be trying to learn from, but because of the media focus, the implication is that they are superior to everyone else – which is why most people grow up wanting to be rich and famous.

Schools (regardless of teachers being well-meaning) reinforce this line of thinking, with their definition of “success” - money and status. Teachers and parents endlessly repeat, “Do your school work so you can get a good job!” Kids quickly learn what “good” means. It most certainly does *not* mean humility, wisdom, or living within the Earth's limits, though some of us struggle for that. Just consider some of today's “heroes”: if we were sane, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, Eric Schmidt and all their colleagues would be regarded as mass-murderers. Their insane wealth is only possible by the insane levels of mining, oil drilling, war, impoverishment, slavery and ecological destruction needed to produce the technologies they've forced upon the world - technologies which also then facilitate more killing by other corporations and by governments.

Even worse are the people they focus on in school “history” classes: the inbred, mentally-ill kings and queens, the generals raping and pillaging as they expand empires on behalf of the elite, the Christopher Colombuses “discovering” already-inhabited lands while also raping and pillaging (on behalf of the elite), etc. Many of them even get a national holiday named after them! You get the picture. These people are defined by ego and arrogance - they're also psychopaths. Unfortunately, because of the relentless work by priests, politicians, schools and the media, most of us have adopted this way of looking at the world, these values of the elite, and this way of defining “success”.

But there is another way. John Marshall III, in *The Lakota Way*, writes of humility among the American Indians:

Humility was a virtue that the Lakota of old expected their leaders to possess. A quiet, humble person, we believed, was aware of other people and other things. An arrogant, boastful man was only aware of himself...

When choosing a leader, we always kept in mind that humility provides clarity where arrogance makes a cloud. The last thing we wanted was to be led by someone whose judgement and actions were clouded by arrogance.

And if you need scientific reassurance, the most up-to-date studies also support the indigenous approach. As David Robson (2020) points out, the latest research indicates that “people with greater humility are better learners, decision-makers and problem solvers... The latest findings suggest that the trait is especially important for leaders, with evidence that displays of humility can improve strategic thinking and boost the performance of colleagues across an organisation.”

Consider the Australian aboriginal saying, “The more you know, the less you need.” Read it over a few times. *The more you know, the less you need.* It's not just something to consider in a capitalist, consumerist culture, it's also very applicable to survival. The aboriginal way of survival, like all other hunter-gatherer cultures, was based on knowledge, wisdom, skill and community. People easily met all of their own needs, and were satisfied and content *within the limits which nature imposed.*

The fact is, for 99% of our time on Earth, humans were *not* living in civilisations. We lived as hunters and gatherers. And in each hunter-gatherer culture, they actively and purposely sought to promote humility and minimise arrogance. “Insulting the meat” is an example from the San people. When a hunter returned with a killed animal, others would insult both the meat and the hunter. They would complain how small the animal is, and how bad it tastes – just so the hunter wouldn't get a big head. (Suzman 2017) Ego and arrogance were seen as weakening the social bonds, and an unhealthy way of relating to all of life, thus weakening their ability to survive. Arrogance was known, for hundreds of thousands of years, to be unhealthy. An arrogant person, if they continued and became problematic, would be avoided or just booted out from the group. For two million years, “success” meant living with humility, respect and responsibility towards others and the Earth.

But the problem is more than just this Western, consumerist, industrial, hi-tech culture. It's *every* civilisation. Civilisation is the direct result of arrogance and can only exist through widespread arrogance towards nature. The whole social arrangement known as civilisation (ie, living in cities, and agriculture) is only possible with the belief that humans are superior. Arrogance is a superiority complex. Civilisation is based on the idea that humans are superior to all other forms of life. Look, we all assume we're the most intelligent, most clever living thing on the planet, and that we're better than all other forms of life. Our religions teach that. Our schools teach that. A superiority complex is the only reason we can live this way, in which our entire way of life is based on destroying everything around us. Arrogance makes mining possible, makes factory farms possible, makes pesticides possible, makes corporations possible, makes slavery possible, makes wage slavery possible, makes an industrial society possible. Heck, that arrogance makes agriculture possible. Agriculture says, “Sorry, nature, the way you do things isn't good enough. We know better than you. We'll force you to do things our way.” Never mind that hunting and gathering proved sustainable, successful, healthy and meaningful for two million years, during which time there was no such things as armies, governments, prisons, police, slavery, patriarchy, money, taxes, war, infectious

disease and famine. These were all creations of civilisation.

In fact, regarding the supposedly “superior intelligence” of civilised humans, how intelligent is it to live in a way which destroys the land you depend on and which poisons your own water? How intelligent is it to live in a way which condemns the majority of people to slavery and misery? How intelligent is it for that majority to accept their slavery and exploitation, generation after generation? How intelligent is it to live in a way in which your diet is poorer and your health poorer than before? How intelligent is it to put poison directly on your food? How intelligent is it for much of your “food” to be, in fact, poison? How intelligent is it to create devices that kill hundreds, thousands or *millions* of people at a time? How intelligent is it to invent devices which can end life on Earth? If anything, civilised humans are by far the *least* intelligent living thing on the planet. Based on just how un-intelligent and destructive civilisation is, you'd have to think that humans are suffering from some form of mass dementia or mass psychopathy. Of course, humans are. It's called civilisation. The disease is what indigenous Americans called *wetiko*. Jack Forbes (2008), in *Columbus and Other Cannibals*, describes it:

To a considerable degree, the development of the wetiko disease corresponds to the rise of what Europeans choose to call civilization. This is no mere coincidence...This disease, this wetiko (cannibal) psychosis, is the greatest epidemic sickness known to man[...]The overriding characteristic of the wetiko is that he consumes other human beings, that is, he is a predator and a cannibal. This is the central essence of the disease[...]

There are many psychological traits that help form the wétiko personality. Greed, lust, inordinate ambition, materialism, the lack of a true ‘face,’ a schizoid (split) personality, and so on are all terms which can be used to describe most wétikos. *But one of the major traits characterizing the truly evil and extreme form of wétikoism is arrogance.*
(emphasis added)

It's not that humans as a species are inherently stupid, arrogant or psychopathic. Just the opposite. Humans were extremely intelligent, wise, compassionate, healthy and strong for two million years. That's how we evolved. That's why we lived for so long on the planet. Humans are peaceful and social by nature. (Fry 2003, 2005, 2013) The problem is civilisation. Civilisation is the worst disease humans have ever been afflicted by. As Forbes writes, "For several thousands of years human beings have suffered from a plague, a disease worse than leprosy, a sickness worse than malaria, a malady much more terrible than smallpox." (As with Covid-19, civilisation is the cause of those diseases to begin with.) Civilisation is a 6,000-year disease which will likely end the human presence on Earth, as well as most other life forms. It's based on arrogance, stupidity and endless destruction and misery.

The point is, survival, whether on a personal level, or a species level, depends on humility. The good thing for you the reader, or anyone, is that on an individual, personal level, anyone can learn to develop humility, just as anyone can work to develop a strong and healthy survival mindset. Anyone can make the effort to re-think how they relate to other people and how they relate to the natural world. Anyone can learn to respect the plants and animals, and to learn from them. Anyone can decide to question the assumptions of civilisation. It's not easy, but it can be done by anyone. That's the good news.

The bad news is that no civilisation has ever been able to cure itself of its arrogance, superiority and stupidity. That's simple history. Every civilisation “civilises” the world until they bring about their own collapse. And unfortunately that's what we're facing: the increasing threats of nuclear war, nuclear reactor accidents, deforestation, desertification, climate change, collapsing ecologies,

collapsing economies, war, spreading poverty, spreading disease and social disintegration, all while the elite scramble to gobble up every last bit of “wealth” that they can while their beaurocratic servants pretend like they care. No amount of voting, petitions, protests, solar panels, electric cars or forcing kids to do homework will change that, because none of them challenge human arrogance, much less civilisation itself. What *could* make a difference few people will consider, even fewer are attempting, and most will violently oppose.

That's another huge reason to cultivate a strong survival mindset. We're increasingly facing the breakdown of society, so a survival mindset is crucial for everyone. But again, it's not just about learning some skills and buying some gear. A healthy survival mindset means humility and responsibility. I mean, sure, you can survive any given immediate situation without humility. But then what's the point of surviving? The Earth doesn't need arrogance!

It helps to question the assumption that life on Earth is based on self-interest and competition, as we're commonly taught in school – those were interpretations by a very sick, Victorian English culture, which was really not fundamentally different than any culture in any civilisation (they're all based on domination, exploitation and control.) Rather, when we look at the wisdom that humans evolved with, and which our ancestors passed from generation to generation over hundreds of thousands of years, we see that the amazing diversity of life that exists on Earth is actually based on *humility, cooperation, and respect among species*. (Radinger 2019; Wohlleben 2017) The more time we spend humbly observing nature, the more this becomes obvious. We have much to learn from the natural world.

It's important for us to develop humility in ourselves, not just for survival, and not just to be a decent person, but so that we can be as fully human and as fully healthy as possible.

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