

Thoughts for Earth Day

Ken Olson

Planet earth dates to some 4.6 billion years ago. After Einstein, the physicist Freeman Dyson led Princeton's Institute of Advanced Studies. In the conclusion to his 1988 book, *Infinite in All Directions*, he wrote about the beginning of life on earth and also about Mind (his word for God), saying, "Mind is patient. Mind has waited for 3 billion years before composing its first string quartet."

The human mind has brought many wonderful things into being, but I'm sure Dyson would have agreed that you can have too much of a good thing, i.e. people. Original nature has gone under plow and bulldozer at an astonishing pace. In 1803-05 Lewis and Clarke traversed the western half of this continent by keelboat, canoe, and on foot all the way from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean. They found a pristine environment, vast forests and other ecosystems superbly managed by Nature itself for millions of years. Now, it's nearly all "developed," and the human presence is almost everywhere. Occasionally, a person can live to be 110 years or more, so it's shocking that this change has transpired in just two such human lifetimes.

Edward Abbey revisited a wondrous place in the canyon country of Utah that had enchanted him as a young person. In an essay titled *How It Was*, he tells that the river and the old trails are gone, blasted and straightened, submerged by reservoirs and pavement, "improved" beyond recognition: "All of this the engineers and politicians and bankers will tell you makes the region easily accessible to everyone, no matter how feeble or flaccid. That is a lie. That is a lie. For those who go there now, smooth, comfortable, quick and easy, sliding through as slick as grease, will never be able to see what we saw. They will never feel what we felt. They will never know what we knew, or understand what we cannot forget."

It took from the beginning of the human race until c.1830 for the world's population to reach one billion. Since then, it has doubled three times, stands now at 8 billion, and is adding c.83 million each year. Tokyo is a city of 40 million people. A satellite image at night reveals the US eastern seaboard lit up from Miami to New York City, and it is not hard to envision a continuous megalopolis. The same is happening all over the globe. Strange, how there is nostalgia for how things once were in our small towns but little grief for the vast prairies that shaped the core of our continent for millions of years. Soon, there will be no room in the world for bison or for pandas, tigers, lions, giraffes, and elephants. Already, people and livestock are by far the most numerous large animals on this humanized, homogenized planet.

In the US, population increase has been running just over 1 percent per year. To most people, that does not sound like much. However, according to geographer Jared Diamond, if that same "compound interest" scenario had been operating worldwide for the last 5,000 years, i.e. from the time of Egypt's great pyramids, by now it would have resulted in 2.7 billion people --on every square foot of land on planet earth! The population curve is going nearly straight up, and one is not a Chicken Little alarmist if the sky really is falling, for the math does not lie.

In a Clint Eastwood movie, Dirty Harry said, “A man’s got to know his limitations.” The same applies to humankind on planet earth. Range Management 101 is to not exceed the carrying capacity of the land: overgrazing means ruination. In other species, nature, all by itself, solves overpopulation problems, but the solutions are not pretty. When one life form gets out of hand, plagues and starvation follow. This is home, forever after, until Mother Earth gets tired of our bad behavior and shrugs us off and, unless we get totally serious about living in sustainable ways, that’s what will happen.

Hitler gave awards to mothers having the most children and then sought to justify WWII with the need for “labensraum,” i.e. living space. But future wars will be about just that. Many resources will run out, hastened by the moronic chants of “Drill, baby, drill.” If we “live like there’s no tomorrow,” there won’t be. Nevertheless, both here and abroad, there are many promoting the astonishing “more babies” idea that more workers will be needed to support an aging population. But soon, those additional millions will also grow old, thus needing additional millions, who, in turn, will need still more.

The idea is nothing short of delusional and deadly, propping up a short-sighted, “no change needed” attitude that, coupled with climate change, will lead an early exit to humanity’s presence on planet earth. The mentality of the world’s richest man, Elon Musk (14 children, that we know of) is “Don’t worry, we’ll make our getaway to other planets,” –abdicating responsibility and leaving behind a devastated planet earth. His rockets cannot hold billions, just a few of the ultra-privileged. And even the nearest other star is 4 light-years away (i.e. 4 years at 186,000 miles per second).

I know, there is something romantic about survivors heading out into the unknown immensities of the galaxy to preserve our species, the stuff of many a Sci-Fi movie. But that’s a myth and a lie that is also profoundly ignorant of the fundamentals of math, ecology, energy, time, and distance. Countless species have gone extinct in earth’s history, most entirely natural; but with the double-deadly factors of overpopulation and climate change, this one would be completely self-caused. The solution lies in limitations and living more simply so that future generations can simply live. And it all starts with learning to love ourselves less --and the entire earth and our children’s future more.

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