"Re-learning" what we've forgotten

Contributed by Chris Maser
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Editor's note: This is Chris Maser's Part Three of his series for Culture Change. I ate this one up, because ever since I read a 1987 article in Discover magazine by Jared Diamond, about hunter-gatherers' working only a few hours a day a few days a week, I've been aware that our modern way of life is not what it's cracked up to be. In Maser's article there is solid anthropological insight applicable to our current challenge as a dysfunctional society facing extinction. In his 18 maxims, he concludes with "Placing material wealth, as symbolized by the money chase, above spirituality, nature, and human well-being is the road to social impoverishment, environmental degradation, and the collapse of societies and their life-support systems." - Jan Lundberg

If we all treat one another with the best principles of human relationships, it is analogous to complying with Nature's biophysical principles by taking responsibility for our own behavior. In other words, if I want to become acquainted with you, it is incumbent on me to determine how I must treat you in order to allow, even encourage, you to reciprocate in kind. Thus, for me to receive the best service, it is my responsibility to initiate a good relationship with the person serving me. Likewise, to have an adequate supply of quality resources in the form of ecoogical services from Nature to run our cities, we must take care of the land in a way that perpetuates the natural capital we require for a quality life. Here, the bottom line is that, by treating one another—as well as the land—with respect, we are uniting the two disparate entities into a single, self-reinforcing feedback loop of complementary services that can be perpetuated through time.

To bring this about, however, we need to view one another and ourselves differently, which necessitates a brief, generalized visit to the hunter-gatherers of olden times. If you are wondering why we need to visit the hunter-gatherers, the answer is simple: to understand what we have forgotten—how to live in harmony with one another and the land.
What the hunter-gatherers knew

The hunting-gathering peoples of the world—Australian aborigines, African Bushman, and similar groups—represent not only the oldest but also perhaps the most successfully adapted human beings. Virtually all of humanity lived by hunting and gathering before about 12,000 years ago. Hunters and gatherers represent the opposite pole of the densely packed, harried urban life most people of today experience. Yet the life philosophy of those same hunter-gatherers may hold the answer to a central question plaguing humanity at it enters the 21st century: Can people live harmoniously with one another and Nature?

Until 1500 AD, hunter-gatherers occupied fully one-third of the world, including all of Australia, most of North America, and large tracts of land in South America, Africa, and northeast Asia, where they lived in small groups without the overarching disciplinary umbrella of a state or other centralized authority. They lived without standing armies or bureaucratic systems, and they exchanged goods and services without recourse to economic markets or taxation.

With relatively simple technology, such as wood, bone, stone, fibers, and fire, they were able to meet their material requirements with a modest expenditure of energy and had the time to enjoy that which they possessed materially, socially, and spiritually. Although their material wants may have been few and finite and their technical skills relatively simple and unchanging, their technology was, on the whole, adequate to fulfill their needs, a circumstance that says the hunting-gathering peoples were the original affluent societies. Clearly, they were free of the industrial shackles in which we find ourselves as prisoners at hard labor caught seeming forever between the perpetual disparity of unlimited wants and insufficient means.

Evidence indicates that these peoples lived surprisingly well together, despite the lack of a rigid social structure, solving their problems among themselves, largely without courts and without a particular propensity for violence. They also demonstrated a remarkable ability to thrive for long periods, sometimes thousands of years, in harmony with their environment. They were environmentally and socially harmonious and thus sustainable because they were egalitarian, and they were egalitarian because they were socially and environmentally harmonious. They intuitively understood the reciprocal, indissoluble connection between their social life and the sustainability of their environment.

Sharing was the core value of social interaction among hunter-gatherers, with a strong emphasis on the importance of generalized reciprocity, which means the unconditional giving of something without any expectation of immediate return. The combination of generalized reciprocity and an absence of private ownership of land has led many anthropologists to consider the hunter-gatherer way of life as a "primitive communism," in the true sense of "communism," wherein property is owned in common by all members of a classless community.

Even today, there are no possessive pronouns in aboriginal languages. The people's personal identity is defined by what they give to the community: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" is a good example of the "self-in-community" foundation that gives rise to the saying in Zulu, umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu: "It is through others that one attains selfhood." (1)

Hunter-gatherer peoples lived with few material possessions for hundreds of thousands of years and enjoyed lives that were in many ways richer, freer, and more fulfilling than ours. These nomadic peoples were (and are) economical in every aspect of their lives, except in telling stories. Stories passed the time during travel, archived the people's history, and passed it forward as the children's cultural inheritance. (2)

These peoples so structured their lives that they wanted little, required little, and found what they needed at their disposal in their immediate surroundings. They were comfortable precisely because they achieved a balance between what they needed and/or wanted by being satisfied with little. There are, after all, two ways to wealth—working harder or wanting less.

The !Kung Bushmen of southern Africa, for example, spent only twelve to nineteen hours a week getting food because their work was social and cooperative, which means they obtained their particular food items with the least possible expenditure of energy. Thus, they had abundant time for eating, drinking, playing, and general socializing. In addition to which, young people were not expected to work until well into their twenties and no one was expected to work after age forty or so. (3)

Like the hunter-gatherers of old, the sense of place for the self-sufficient, nomadic Bedouins ("desert dwellers" in Arabic) is a seasonal journey. With respect to socializing, however, Bedouins have long had specific meeting places. In the desert of Sinai, an acacia tree still serves as a landmark and meeting place that offers shelter and social contact to travelers. The "makhad" (which means "the meeting place around the acacia tree") is a traditional Bedouin meeting place, where, according to their customs of friendship and hospitality, all who pass through the desert are welcomed. In fact, there is a particular acacia tree in the Sinai desert at the oasis garden of Ein-Khudra (an oasis mentioned in the Bible) that has been cultivated continuously by the same Bedouin family for over a thousand years.

These "oasis gardens" are remarkably fertile and filled with abundance, which reflects the Bedouin's love of and respect for their desert home. The makhads are a socially recognized commons in that they help to sustain the nomadic lifestyle—acting as a fixed point around which the nomadic journey revolves. (4)

Hunter-gatherers also had much personal freedom. There were, among the !Kung Bushmen and the Hadza of Tanzania, for instance, either no leaders or only temporary leaders with severely limited authority. These societies had personal equality in that everyone belonged to the same social class and had gender equality. Their technologies and social systems, including their economies of having enough or a sense of "enoughness," allowed them to live sustainably for tens of thousands of years. One of the reasons they were sustainable was their lack of connection between what an individual produced and that person's economic security, so acquisition of things to ensure personal survival and material comfort was not an issue.

In the beginning, nomadic hunters and gatherers, who have represented humanity for most of its existence, probably saw the world simply as "habitat" that fulfilled all of their life's requirements, a view that allowed the people to understand themselves as part of a seamless community. For example, the Apache word "Shi-Ni," is used for "land" and "mind," an indication of how closely the people were united to the land.
With the advent of herding, agriculture, and progressive settlement, however, humanity created the concept of "wilderness," and so the distinctions between "tame" (equals "controlled") and "wild" (equals "uncontrolled") plants and animals began to emerge in the human psyche. Along with the notion of tame and wild plants and animals came the perceived need to not only "control" space but also to "own" it through boundaries in the form of corrals, pastures, fields, and villages. In this way, the uncontrolled land or "wilderness" of the hunter-gatherers came to be viewed in the minds of settled folk as "unproductive," "free" for the taking, and/or as a threat to their existence.

Agriculture, therefore, brought with it both a sedentary way of life and a permanent change in the flow of living. Whereas the daily life of a hunter-gatherer was a seamless whole, a farmer's life became divided into "home" and "work." While a hunter-gatherer had intrinsic value as a human being with respect to the community, a farmer's sense of self-worth became extrinsic, both personally and with respect to the community as symbolized by, and permanently attached to "productivity"—a measure based primarily on how hard a person worked and thus produced in good or services.

In addition, the sedentary life of a farmer changed the notion of "property." To the hunter-gatherers, mobile property, that which one could carry with them (such as one's hunting knife or gathering basket) could be owned, but fixed property (such as land) was to be shared equally through rights of use, but could not be personally owned to the exclusion of others and the detriment of future generations. This was such an important concept, that it eventually had a word of special coinage, "usufruct." According to the 1999 Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, "usufruct," is a noun in Roman and Civil Law. Usufruct means that one has the right to enjoy all the advantages derivable from the use of something that belongs to another person provided the substance of the thing being used is neither destroyed nor injured.

So the dawn of agriculture, which ultimately gave birth to civilizations, created powerful, albeit unconscious, biases in the human psyche. For the first time, humans clearly saw themselves as distinct from and—in their reasoning at least—superior to the rest of Nature. They therefore began to consider themselves as masters of, but not as members of, Nature's biophysical community of life.

To people who lived a sedentary life, like farmers, land was a commodity to be bought, owned, and sold. Thus, when hunter-gatherer cultures, such as the American Indians, "sold" their land to the invaders (in this case Europeans), they were really selling the right to "use" their land, not to "own" it outright as fixed property, something the Europeans did not understand. The European's difficulty in comprehending the difference probably arose because, once a sedentary and settled life style is embraced, it is almost impossible to return to a nomadic way of life, especially the thinking that accompanies it.

We, as individuals, may therefore despair when we contemplate the failure of so many earlier human societies to recognize their pending environmental problems, as well as their failure to resolve them—especially when we see our local, national, and global society committing the same kinds of mistakes on an even larger scale and faster time track. But the current environmental crisis is much more complex than earlier ones because modern society is qualitatively different than previous kinds of human communities. Old problems are occurring in new contexts and new problems are being created, both as short-term solutions to old problems and as fundamentally new concepts. Pollution of the world's oceans, depletion of the ozone layer, production of enormous numbers and amounts of untested chemical compounds that find their way into the environment, and the potential human exacerbation of global climate change were simply not issues in olden times. But they are the issues of today.

There are lessons we, as a society today, can re-learn from the people who once lived—and the few who still live—a hunter-gatherer way of life. I say, "relearn" because, as writer Carlo Levi once said, "the future has an ancient heart."

What we must "re-learn"

1. Life's experiences are personal and intimate.

2. Sharing life's experiences by working together and taking care of one another along the way is the price of sustainability.

3. Cooperation and coordination, when coupled with sharing and caring, precludes the perceived need to compete, except in play—and perhaps in story telling.

4. The art of living lies in how we practice relationship—beginning with ourselves—because practicing relationship is all we humans ever do in life.

5. Leisure is affording the necessary amount of time to fully engage each thought we have, each decision we make, each task we perform, and each person with whom we converse in order to fulfill a relationship's total capacity for a quality experience.

6. Simplicity in living and dying depends on and seeks things small, sublime, and sustainable.

7. There is more beauty and peace in the world than ugliness and cruelty.
8. Any fool can complicate life, but it requires a certain genius to make and keep things simple.

9. For a group of people to be socially functional, they must be equally informed about what is going on within the group; in other words, there must be no secrets that are actually or potentially detrimental to any member of the group.

10. Separating work from social life is not necessary for economic production—and may even be a serious social mistake.

11. By consciously limiting our "wants," we can have enough to comfortably fulfill our necessities as well as some of our most ardent desires—and leave more for other people to do the same.

12. Simplicity is the key to contentment, adaptability, and survival as a culture; beyond some point, complexity becomes a decided disadvantage with respect to cultural longevity, just as it is to the evolutionary longevity of a species.

13. The notion of scarcity is largely an economic construct to foster competitive consumerism and thereby increase profits, but is not necessarily an inherent part of human nature. (We need to overcome our fear of economically contrived scarcity and marvel instead at the incredible abundance and resilience of the Earth.)

14. Linking individual well-being strictly to individual production is the road to competition, which in turn leads inevitably to social inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation.

15. Self-centeredness and acquisitiveness are not inherent traits of our species, but rather acquired traits based on a sense of fear and insecurity within our social setting that fosters the perceived need of individual and collective competition, expressed as the need to impress others.

16. Inequality based on gender and/or social class is a behavior based on fear disguised as "social privilege."

17. Mobile property, that which one can carry with them, can be owned, whereas fixed property—such as land, which may be borrowed—is to be shared equally through rights of generational use, but can not be personally owned to the detriment of future generations.

18. Placing material wealth, as symbolized by the money chase, above spirituality, nature, and human well-being is the road to social impoverishment, environmental degradation, and the collapse of societies and their life-support systems. (3)

So, where are we today? We are the exact antithesis of the hunter-gatherers in many respects: (1) who we are, (2) how we obtain resources, (3) what we own, (4) our connection with Nature, and (5) who benefits and who pays. I am, however, going to focus on our connection with Nature, because, in a sense, the others are embodied in the characteristics of that relationship.

The hunter-gatherers knew themselves to be an inseparable part of Nature and therefore did their best to honor Nature by blending in with the seasonal cycles of birth and death, of hunter, gatherer, and hunted. Through their spirituality and myths, they sought to understand the "Nature Gods," appease them, and serve them so they might continue to be generous in the future.

We city folks, on the other hand, have all but lost our conscious connection with Nature, in part because a number of modern religions, such as Christianity and Judaism, consider humanity to be separate from and above all other life on Planet Earth. In addition, we live in protective "boxes" of one sort or another wherein our daily necessities are transported—including our experience of the outer world via television. Consequently, we rarely experience the night sky, the seasonal flights of migrating geese, or the wide-open spaces that are as yet uncluttered by the trappings of humanity. And those city folks who do hunt, normally do so with high-powered rifles that make their game into the abstractions of sport and trophies — not lives taken with reverence for the necessity of food.

The hunter-gatherers lived lightly upon the land, honoring its cycles, being patience with Nature’s pace, taking only what they needed, and thereby allowing the land to renew itself before they took from it again. In this way, generations passed through the millennia, each tending to be at least as well off as the preceding one.

Because we have a propensity to see Nature as a commodity to be competitively exploited for our immediate benefit, we are, at best, short-changing the generations of the future by passing forward unpaid environmental bills and, at worst, blatantly stealing their inheritance and thus setting all generations on a course toward environmental bankruptcy. The first is irresponsible, the latter unconscionable.
While the hunter-gatherers lived an effective life, we are focused almost totally on efficiency. And they are not the same thing!

Endnotes

1. Barbara Nussbaum. 2003. Ubuntu. Resurgence 221:13.

2. Sally Pomme Clayton. 2003. Thread of Life. Resurgences 221:29.

3. The foregoing discussion of hunter-gatherers is taken from: (1) the Foreword, Introduction, and first eight chapters of the 1998 book "Limited wants, unlimited means" edited by John Gowdy and published by Island Press, Washington, D.C. The authors are as follows: Foreword by Richard B. Lee, Introduction by John Gowdy, Chapter 1 by Marshall Sahlins, Chapter 2 by Richard B. Lee, Chapter 3 by Lorna Marshall, Chapter 4 by James Woodburn, Chapter 5 by Nurit Bird-David, Chapter 6 by Eleanor Leacock, Chapter 7 by Richard B. Lee, and Chapter 8 by Ernest S. Burch, Jr.; (2) Rebecca Adamson. People who are Indigenous to the Earth. 1997. YES! A Journal of Positive Futures, Winter:26-27; (3) Gus diZerega. 1997. Re-thinking the Obvious: Modernity and Living Respectfully with Nature. Trumpeter 14:184-193; (4) Richard K. Nelson. 1983. Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL. pp. 214-215; (5) Stephanie Mills. 2001. Words for the Wild. Resurgence 208:38-40; and (6) Roderick Frazier Nash. 2003. Wild World. Resurgence 216:36-38.

4. The foregoing discussion about the nomadic Bedouins is based on: Will Cretney. 2000. A Nomadic Journey. Resurgence 203:24-25.

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This essay is condensed from Chris Maser's 2004 book The Perpetual Consequences of Fear and Violence: Rethinking the Future. Maisonneuve Press, Washington, D.C. 373 pp.

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Further Reading:

"Ancient innovations for present conventions toward extinction" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #161, June 10, 2007:

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