Time To Decide What Matters

Contributed by Keith Farnish for Culture Change
14 September 2009

Editor's note: the author has just come out with his excellent book Time's Up!, joining the Chelsea Green stable of works on sustainability.

How important do you think humans are?

For millennia we have been taught that human beings have a vital almost divine role in the Great Chain of Being, and to look around the cities where most of us now live you could indeed be forgiven for thinking that we are ecologically dominant, if not vital to the functioning of life on Earth: I think it's about time this was put into some kind of perspective.

Modern human beings, or homo sapiens sapiens, are but one species within the large order of animals known as mammalia. Enveloping the mammals is the far larger phylum known as chordata, or animals with stiff spinal rods; but even the chordata, which also includes all the fish, reptiles and birds pales into insignificance compared to the rest of the Animal Kingdom, which is largely ruled by the exoskeletal insects and the writhing omnipresent worms. A great Kingdom of animals, which just happen to occupy a tiny niche in the tree of life, alongside the plants and the fungi, not to mention the slime molds – our surprisingly close relatives.

But, of course, most of life on Earth consists of bacteria and, if you consider them to be living, viruses. Countless trillions of single-celled organisms in every spoonful of soil. It seems to make the 6.8 billion human beings little more than a smudge in the global Petri dish; it just happens that in our civilized manifestation that relatively small number have become capable of a huge amount of damage. Insignificant, but so very dangerous.

The Psychosis Of Civilization

Civilized humans are global predators occupying not only the top of the food chain, but at the very pinnacle of the global energy pyramid. We have become a ferocious but delicate flower waiting to be blown away in the next breeze of extinction; yet what do we see as the most important factor in our role as human beings?

Money.

Our values have become outrageously skewed in favor of whatever most benefits the onward march of the global economy. We do not see the rise and fall of habitat viability on the television news, instead we see the rise and fall of the markets in the capital economy; we do not count species extinctions in newspaper bar charts, but we urgently count companies going bust; we do not map the catastrophic breaks in the energy flows between different parts of an ecosystem, but we do acknowledge every time a budget airline discontinues a route, or whenever a main road has "severe" delays. As if it matters.

The psychosis of Industrial Civilization is endemic: every person that places his or her trust in the system of hierarchies, politics, markets and mass consumption undergoes a fundamental readjustment in priorities. No longer does the fate of our species rest upon our increasingly precipitous position within the global ecology; we can all hold hands, actually or virtually, and celebrate the majesty of the global economic miracle, safe in the knowledge that it will take us forward into a glittering future of jobs, money and all the other civilized things we have been taught to desire.

How we have become so determined to destroy the continuum of life in search of something so utterly trivial, has its roots in the history of civilization. Every civilization has had its own goals, but ultimately they have all come down to one thing: the insatiable desire to progress in whatever way is dictated by the elite members at the very top. Such “progress” takes many forms, but whether it be exploration, scientific discovery, technological prowess, imperial power or simply the idea of being “the best,” civilizations have to feel they are progressing in some way; and so its subjects -– the civilians -– become part of that collective desire. For what are we if we don’t keep progressing? Failures. From our fear of failure, others above us draw their strength -– just at the moment we seem to be reaching the end, and as we stretch out our fingertips, another line is drawn even further away. So we note the new goals and conform to the wishes of the system; continuing to do as we are told.

Through this psychotic behavior, civilizations thrive... for a short while.

What Is Really Important

How do you feel about your place in the world now? Do you feel small, insignificant, worthless, just a tiny part of something far greater than yourself? This natural feeling of inferiority when you realize you are just a tiny part of a greater whole is the reason why medieval religious leaders were so resolute about our exulted position in the aforementioned Great Chain of Being, just below the angels, but above all other forms of life -– so long as you accepted that monarchs, priests and landowners were considerably more perfect than the rest of us.

It’s the same in the industrial economy: there is this global system that has enormous, if transient, power over the whole of existence; that governs every aspect of the lives of the civilized, but you don’t have to feel small, so long as you are told how important it is to go to school, get a job, go to the shopping mall or buy something online, follow the latest fashions, and cast your vote. You are empowered by your participation in these activities. It’s just that some people are more empowered than others.

But why on Earth do you need to be told how important you are? It speaks volumes about our state of mind when in order to feel worthwhile we have to, for instance, achieve good grades at school. We are all human beings, for goodness sake! Even more than that, we are what we are: our consciousness is bound up in our physical being, and everything we know and feel -– everything we will ever be -– is determined by our personal interaction with what is around us. We are at the center of our personal universe; not in any selfish way, but simply because we can never truly perceive anything outside of our point of view.

Thomas Nagel, the American philosopher, summed this up beautifully in his essay, “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?”:

After all, what would be left of what it was like to be a bat if one removed the viewpoint of the bat?

Substitute “human” for “bat” and it is obvious that human experience has to be a unique thing for humans and, by extension, for each individual human. Like all life, we are carriers of our DNA -– survival machines that have an innate desire to reproduce and continue our species -– but we are also uniquely ourselves. That is why we are important; not because humans are essential to the global ecology or even because we are essential to the absurd construct we call Civilization, but because what matters, is what matters to us.

How could it be any other way?

Think about this for a short while and it becomes obvious that the civilized world’s destruction of the natural environment

cannot under any circumstances be acceptable, for it will endanger the one thing which matters above all else: ourselves.

Decision Time

You have to make a choice. Are you going to continue supporting and extending the global reign of Industrial Civilization; or are you going to once again learn to value yourself as the center of your universe, and the thing that matters above all else?

To me that choice is remarkably easy, but you might take some persuading, not only because of the insidious hold that the civilized world has upon everything we do, but because there are other things that also matter dearly to you. They matter to me as well, which is why I wrote the following in Time's Up!:

More than just our natural tendency to survive, though, is the manifestation of that survival instinct in the way we think. Consider the question: What would you risk your life to save? My initial instinct is to say 'my family', then 'me', then, with a little more thought, 'the Earth in general' and 'my friends'. Remove the Earth from the equation and you have the kind of answer that most people give.

In fact, all three typical responses are directly related to the natural instinct for survival. We instinctively want to protect our families in order to secure the continuation of our DNA through blood relatives and the people they depend upon to survive. We want to protect ourselves in order to protect our own DNA, and the opportunity for that to be further replicated. We want to protect our friends because they too are human beings, but not only that, we have consciously chosen our closest friends because of what they have in common with us – they are almost like family.

I think you will agree that, based on the argument earlier, we can all be justified in wanting to vigorously protect ourselves. It is clear that means not just us as individuals, but also our families and those other people we really care about and need: our community.

Community is the antithesis of civilization for civilization thrives on the division of humanity into tiny, atomized, competing parts; but community is the form in which humans have always survived best. The choice is simple now: Civilization or Community; Progress or Humanity; Death or Life.

* * * * *

Keith Farnish is a writer, philosopher and radical environmental campaigner who lives in Essex, UK with his family and his garden. His book, Time's Up! An Uncivilized Solution To A Global Crisis, is published in September 2009 by Chelsea Green in the USA. The book is available for free via amatterofscale.com. He is also author of The Earth Blog and runs the anti-greenwashing site The Unsuitablog.

Keith Farnish's previous article in Culture Change was Thinking About The Future last April.