

Thinking About The Future

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The future is everything we will ever know, and everything we have never known. Some people deny its existence: one group of people are the Pirahã of Amazonia, who have created for themselves a temporal bubble that reflects their highly sustainable, hunter-gatherer lives – the future is irrelevant because life is what is happening now...

and they have no reason to doubt that they will continue living in the same way. Another group of people who deny the existence of the future are vast hoards of civilized humans, living in densely populated, money and resource dependent parts of the world: for them, the real future is too frightening to consider so they have created for themselves an artificial one in which they can pursue whatever dream the civilized world considers appropriate to its way of being. If your dream future contains happy children, material goods, vacations, a good career and a fulfilling, healthy retirement in a world of infinite capacity and endless resources, why the hell would you want to know what is really going to happen?!

For the Pirahã, their future may be tragically cut short by industrial incursion, disease and a catastrophic change in their natural ecosystem; but they are not in denial, they have just had no need to fear the change that may come. We, on the other hand, are perhaps in the terminal stages of a terrible collective state of denial, manufactured by a system that dares not speak the truth about the future: Industrial Civilization is close to ending, taking with it a great sweep of the global ecosystem as the machine claws at the air, the earth and the seas in a last-gasp attempt to stay alive. That future is one that even the most hardened survivalist would struggle to contemplate in all its dystopian horror. It mustn't get to that stage; but have no doubt, it will if we don't stop Industrial Civilization soon.

There is another future: to quote a recent correspondent, it is one that sits "beneath and between the cracks" of our current ideals. A more "mundane" existence, those that sell the fast-paced, luxury-filled dream would have us believe; a life of "toil", those that ply the cradle-to-grave career paths of the industrialised civilian would call it; a world of "bleakness", those that fill our heads with gigabytes and the artificial realities we dumbly obey would have us perceive. These may be the lies that keep us from seeking an alternative, but this alternative is still different. We are tied to our current lives in so many ways that any change – however vital, however potentially rich and fulfilling, however much it reconnects us with the real world – is difficult to perceive.

In order to make a new future, we have to first break with the past.

Breaking Bonds – Making Connections

This isn't a self-help guide. I don't know what your current circumstances are, so there is no way that I can guide you through the precise path you would be best to follow if (and that is a big "if", as you will see) you decide that you – and the people you spend your life with – want to make the break from Industrial Civilization. What I can do is write from personal experience, and share some of the issues myself, and others I know well, are having to face up to. The most difficult of these issues to address, I think, is breaking the bonds that tie you to your current situation.

Here is a short list of things that you may feel you are dependent upon, and which you might find it difficult to sever your bonds with or, at least, stretch them:

- Family beyond those you live with
- Close friends
- People you share a social life with
- Work and other sources of income
- School

- Your "community" in general (neighbours, shops, clubs etc.)

One factor that they all have in common are that they involve people to a great extent: personal ties, however complex or even fraught they may be, are certainly at the forefront of my mind when making decisions about moving to another place, and/or living in an entirely different way. To a certain extent it is about being rejected – how many people do you know that you can honestly say would wholeheartedly support your decision to step out of the world you and they occupy? Rejection can be hard to take, and so can the thought of losing a part of the world that you have become so used to – even if it just means you won't be able to see (eye-to-eye with) someone as often as you might previously have.

When you consider how important many of these bonds are in an objective sense, when compared to the kinds of connections we have lost with the real world then a sense of proportion does emerge. School is a place to train children to be workers, and work is predominantly a way of earning money to buy things you probably don't even need; the social interactions they also allow, as a by-product, can be gained in many other places. Those friends and members of your family that you fear you may not see so often: how often do you actually see them, and how important are they really to you...or you to them? The "community" you live in may bear some of the hallmarks of a close-knit neighbourhood, but if it really is a place where people can depend upon each other, then you are in a small minority. You may even be able to take some of these people with you...

The real wrench, though, is change. We all fear change, even though it may excite or enliven us, because change invokes primal fears about the need to be connected to the environment upon which we are dependent. It is for a very good reason that we adapt quickly to repetitive tasks; so that we are able to carry them out while still being aware of changes to our surroundings and, although this is probably a more modern phenomenon, being able to keep our minds busy whilst carrying out tasks that are not exactly stimulating. Sufferers of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) encapsulate this fear of change in any number of habits and behaviours – but really, OCD is just an extreme example of something we all experience from time to time.

Moving beyond civilization is, for most of us, going to be a change of immense proportions, at least in terms of the adjustments we will have to make to our lives in order to live in relative stability. We have become so used to being cosseted in a synthetic shell, that the mere act of reconnecting with a world that has become alien to us, evokes surprisingly strong reactions. My personal experience is that many other people see such connection as highly unusual, even laughable; and that is the reason we are destroying our life-support machine.

Don't forget that we have grown up in a world where, increasingly, there is seen to be only one way to live, and that one way is intrinsically disconnected from the natural environment that we come from, and are still part of. There are so many other ways to live, even to the extent that the next move you make could be towards a type of living that has never been done before, but which is no more wrong than any other way of living that has, at its heart, a survivable future. It seems that the perception of breaking bonds when we move to a different life is just part of the essential process of reconnection.

Talking About The Future

This essay was originally going to address just one thing: the way in which we talk to the people we love about the future, and specifically how we talk to children. It has become clear that to get to that point we need to address two other key things – the reason we need to change to a different future, and why change does not have to be for the worse. In a way, that simple assessment makes the act of talking about the future, and the inevitable changes we face, through our own tragic inaction or (and how can anyone deny this is better?) our conscious, proactive efforts; far easier to do. That's not to say it is easy, but at least we have a place to start.

Children seem to have an infinite capacity for change: in a way they are templates for the final, and far more inflexible, adults they will become, having been shaped according to the culture they have grown up in. Ironically, my fear of

change is not a fear for myself, but for other people, and particularly my children, who I don't want to hurt. In fact I am likely to be affecting myself far more than them, due to their natural resilience and, at least in the longer term, stunningly blasé attitude to change. I have observed children who have lost parents, undergone marital breakdown and been dragged all over the world to fulfil the career ambitions of their parents: and, by and large, they seem to have come out of it surprisingly unscathed. This is not to say that such events are not traumatic, but the point I am trying to make is that we, as parents (if you are reading this from that perspective) tend to overestimate the impact of change: you are more likely to traumatise a child by telling them they are going to be traumatised by a change, rather than just getting on with it.

That said, it is absolutely right, and essential, in my opinion, to treat children as equal partners in any decision they are going to – at least materially – be affected by. Conversation is wonderfully enriching for families: not only is it an opportunity to share ideas and opinions, it is also surprising what you can learn from the down-to-earth attitudes of children. Change should be a shared experience for so many reasons, not least because everyone involved is in it together: maybe that's just a truism, but it's one that is all too easily overlooked. Different people are affected by different things, and in different ways (as we have seen with the example of OCD); my children are no exception, and seem to change with the tides some weeks – one being highly emotional about an event while the other is completely untroubled by the same thing; then the next day it could swap round entirely. It's a dynamic that can be frustrating at times, but one that shows how important it is to understand those we are going to be taking with us into whatever future we choose to make for ourselves.

And don't forget, that although the future may seem bleak, catastrophic and frightening; it doesn't have to be like that. There is more than one future, and it's time to start thinking about yours.

The Earth Blog: Giving the Earth a Future

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