

The Causes of Alienation  
by T.M.Hoy

“Perhaps the most radical thing we can do is stay home, so we can learn the names of the plants and animals around us; so that we can begin to know what tradition we are part of.”

Terry Tempest Williams

Calling someone an animal is usually considered a gross insult, even though we ARE animals. In Western societies we are taught to think of ourselves as superior to animals, and the natural functions we share with them, such as chewing, urinating, excreting, and ejaculating, are viewed with disgust. So distant are we from our surrounding terrain that 'nature' is typically defined as an environment free of human presence.

This disconnection from the natural world, the feeling that we don't quite fit in with natural cycles, can be partially traced to our self-awareness. We are thinking beings that tend to be self-conscious, and this translates into a certain awkwardness and uncertainty in our behavior. Instinct no longer serves us as an infallible guide to action. We depend on our thoughts for direction. These thoughts we rely on are themselves the product of belief systems; the rules and customs we imbibe from our elders along with our mother's milk. We see the world through our elder's eyes; accept 'reality' as they've defined it, and live within society by agreeing to its rules.

But the distance and subjectivity self-awareness brings are not sufficient to explain our feelings of separation from nature. After all, many species have a large measure of self-awareness, including chimpanzees, the great apes, dolphins, whales, and others, and they don't share our troubles. Neither do preliterate Neolithic societies, that live in close co-operation with nature.

Why then are we so unhappy, so cut off from one another, and so hostile to other creatures in the landscape we inhabit? Why are we unable to live in harmony with the world, as so many indigenous peoples do?

I believe our estrangement from each other and nature has its roots with the invention of money. Prior to the concept of coinage, ancient peoples around the globe had economies based on gift giving, sharing, and barter, and the human relationship with nature was one of the highest respect. Nature was thought of as a sacred being on whom life depended, and plants, animals, and the land itself were considered the equal of or superior to humans. Living things required honor and worship in order to influence them, in the hopes they would give up their lives for the tribe.

Everything on Earth was believed to have a spirit, and was sacred. The sun, moon, and sky, mountains, streams, and forests, hawk and field mouse, salmon and bear, were all holy beings to whom humans spoke reverently, made offerings, beseeched for assistance, and were closely observed and imitated to learn their wisdom.



When nature was sacred...  
(art by Ruth Richards)



Peoples living in harmony with nature; in awe of it (art by Howard Terpning).

The rhythms of cultures followed those of nature, as people adapted to the growth, plenty, and hunger brought by the changing seasons and learned the annual patterns governing the life cycles of animals and plants.

This slowly changed as humans tamed animals, discovered agriculture, and began to build cities. Each of these changes further removed people from the landscape, and lessened human interaction with the wilderness. But the most shocking, revolutionary changes came with the idea of coinage, first introduced in 640 or 630 B.C.E. in Asia Minor (modern Greece and Western Turkey).

The philosophical and social changes brought by money, though largely unexamined by mainstream media and educational systems, were profound. Coins are a purely man-made value system, independent of nature, and related only to human exchanges. A coin is a human artifact, with the value set by human authority. It has value only to those who understand and accept what it represents; a thing that can be traded for goods and services, which are in turn established solely by the amount of human labor or effort needed to create them.

This one concept – of a token possessing independent value, transformed societies, and our relationship with nature. Money changes our view of the world, because it ignores what nature values. Instead of seeing animals as holy beings whom we must treat with respect as neighbors and kin, they become 'things' whose bodies can be butchered and sold for profit. Plants are no longer thought of as teachers, givers of life, and our benefactors, but become merely objects that can be uprooted and crushed, gathered, and stored for exchange. Nature herself in all her parts is drained of life by this view. Mountains no longer inspire awe; they exist only to be mined and quarried. Forests no longer whisper secrets to us, and harbor great mysteries; they are chopped down for lumber. Rivers and streams don't

talk a primal language we share; they're diverted and dammed for irrigation. The idea of offering them respect, making a conscious effort to be attentive to their needs and desires is thought to be absurd, a primitive worldview deserving of contempt.



Money twisted humanity's relationship with nature.  
(above: early Egyptian image of coinage)



But not everyone was poisoned.  
(Above: famous Yap stone coins of Polynesia)

It's true that not all cultures that developed the idea of money/tokens were deformed in this way. The peoples of Polynesia in the South Pacific traded enormous stone wheels; many North American Indian tribes used cowrie shells as a medium of exchange, and other examples abound, all cultures that escaped being poisoned by the concept. But the precious metal coinage that emerged in Greece impacted every culture it touched on the trade routes that led through Persia, India, and on to China.

In time this degradation of nature, and the notion of human superiority and dominance, came to be the norm for cultures that used metal coins. The terrain we live in has long been seen as existing solely for our benefit, our fellow living creatures as mute servants valued only as they fulfill our needs and desires.

This alienation from nature was intensified by the Industrial Revolution, which flowed from that worldview. Industrialization can be roughly defined as the large-scale use of machines to capture and exploit nonhuman sources of energy. While industrialization and its origins are complex, it can be summed up as the results of efforts by a group of 18th century Europeans (mostly Britons), who applied scientific discoveries to build powerful new machines. This was a continuation of the quest by humans to control nature, an attempt which went dormant in Europe for centuries following the collapse of the Roman Empire, but sprang to life again during the Renaissance. The lust for power is nothing new, of course, but it dominated the European worldview as the processes of the Industrial Revolution were taking place, and took shape as the pursuit of making nature compliant to human wishes.

Mechanical inventions expanded rapidly in number, scope, and size and with them transformed first European societies, and later the African, American, and Asian societies European colonizers enslaved. As Lewis Mumford recounts in his classic work *The Myth of the Machine* (1966), new alien rhythms were imposed on people as clocks and machines dictated patterns of work and ways of living.

The greed of machine owners quickly manifested itself as a mania for efficiency, demanding ever more productivity from workers and machines. This in turn imposed the necessity of standardization of life itself, and the need for the interchangeability of parts and people. Diversity and creativity were seen as 'inefficient', and as hindrances to be snuffed out (except for the elite). Education had to be narrowed down, focused on a standard body of knowledge, to produce workers that shared the same beliefs and set of facts about the world.

The entire world was slowly standardized. The process had begun much earlier with the idea that nature was just a thing to be used. This was taken to a new level of intensity as things became private property, and were then further depersonalized into commodities. A commodity is anything that can be made into uniform(standardized) units of identical(interchangeable) size, quality, and characteristics. Most of the natural world can be carved up into commodities. A short list includes animals (with different grades and kinds of meat and hides, like pork bellies, prime beef, etc.); Fruits, vegetables, and grains(everything from orange juice to wheat, corn, and barley); grades and types of lumber (from hardwoods like oak and teak to plywood); quarried stone (marble to granite to gravel); metals(precious ones – gold, silver, platinum, and base – lead, iron, copper, tin); and so on and so forth, a list that stretches for pages of fine print in financial market journals.



The production of commodities is basically the conversion of the living into the dead. Things are first torn from their environment, are stripped of their natural shapes, and are mutilated for ease of use by manufacturers and machine owners. Metal bearing stone is gouged from the earth, crushed into ore, and is ultimately melted in furnaces, or 'purified' with acids and cast into bars or other shapes, awaiting further refinements by industrial users. Trees are chopped down, their limbs lopped off, bark stripped, sawn into uniform lengths, then treated with toxic chemicals to kill any insects that might survive the process, while hardening the wood now ready for use by the construction industry and other users. Animal, plant, mineral, land and water, receive the same brutal treatment, transformed from unique living beings into dead mass-produced commodities.

A society alienated from nature.

The same death was dealt out to cultures rooted in the land. Indigenous peoples entire lives are built around an intimate understanding of the land and its creatures, for their survival depends on it. To be sustainable, hunter-gatherers and subsistence agriculturalists and pastoralists must live lightly on the earth, and be attuned to its nuances. Myths and spiritual practices of such peoples reinforce the ethics of respect for nonhuman others, and sensitivity to the other's needs and moods is essential for a balanced long-term relationship.

With the arrival of machine cultures, these people were annihilated, forced either to fight (and be slaughtered by superior weaponry), or be dispossessed. Uprooted from their land, most starved in alien terrain where creatures and seasonal life cycles were unknown to them, or they died of alien diseases brought by the invaders.



The people of Western societies were also rootless, and alienated, their ties to the land severed by generations of removal from rural areas to factory jobs in the cities; strangers to each other and the land. This anonymity has become complete in modern life. We are born among strangers in hospitals; live in apartments and suburbs where neighbors are unknown to us or have no commonality; are schooled amongst strangers, and are trained to politely shun one another during our daily numbing routine; finally to die among strangers, and be buried among them anonymous and unmourned.

People are treated as disposable commodities whose only value is an economic one, just as the land is mere property, one piece exchangeable for another with artificial values assigned to them, uncaring of their ecology or innate character.

Industrialization and machine culture created a world of limits, where people are fearful of nature, and live in artificial environments that exclude the wild and unpredictable. Modern humans have thus lost the knowledge of self-sufficiency those living on the land possess, and have been made dependent on machines for survival. This insulation from direct experience and buffers from a nonhuman world also serve to prevent self inquiry, deadening our senses, and killing our sense of wonder.



This is what we've become... a curse upon the land, killing all life.

We have all but forgotten that what brings meaning to life, the only things of true value, are relationships. Interactions with each other, and with nonhuman others is the only source of love and friendship; of aid and comfort in times of need; of creating a legacy for future generations.

If we are to break free from the prison of machine culture, we must abandon its way of life, reject a life lived among strangers, working as an anonymous robot for faceless organizations, collecting mass-produced junk that poisons the earth and clutters our environment. We must replace this alienating horror with small communities of like-minded friends, sensitive to the ecology of the earth where we live, working to create our own food and tools by sustainable methods that are thoughtful of nature.

Slow down, and seek out the wildness in nature. Respect that wildness; worship it – for it is the source of life, and is sacred. Find the spark of wildness within, and set it free.



Can we regain that wildness, and set it free ?  
(image by Robert Schoch)