

Homeostasis

by Bill Herbst

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As far as I know, no species of life has ever existed on earth that is equipped for or capable of truly living in harmony with nature. By “nature,” I mean the overall biosphere that supports all life on this planet.

My assumption is that every species is “endowed” with a self-aggrandizing assertiveness, often to the point of outright aggression. The Biblical phrase, “Go forth and multiply” seems to apply in every case. Many factors contribute to the ability to reproduce, but basically I’m talking about the ongoing search for “food.” Most terrestrial plant species rely on sunlight, the atmosphere, water, and nutrients absorbed from the soil. Animal species come in the trifecta of herbivores, carnivores, and omnivores. (I’m leaving out the realm of bacteria and viruses, but they seem to me pretty much equivalent.) Essentially, everything eats everything else. We are both predators and prey.

It’s an incredible system of homeostasis — harmony and balance achieved out of apparent disharmony and imbalance. Every species pursues its own self-interest without regard for the impact of that drive on the world. And yet, the astonishing interconnectedness of all species results in a cumulatively self-regulating and self-correcting harmony that keeps life flourishing. This works brilliantly most of the time. Watch almost any nature documentary series produced over the past 30 years, and you come away with an enhanced appreciation for just how truly amazing the earth is. Goldilocks, indeed.

On rare occasions, the life-system of the entire planet resets in traumatic periods called mass extinction events, which are disruptions that result in die-off of 75% or more of then-living species on the earth. These events are provoked by some severe imbalancing factor — either internally (such as when a single species or class of species achieves too much “success” and domination) or externally (such as when a large meteor collides with the earth).

Over the three and a half billion years since organic life initially developed on our planet, the fossil record tells us that such cataclysms have happened five times, with a sixth now underway. The last biggie, according to science, called the *Cretaceous Extinction*, was 65 million years ago, when a meteor strike wiped out the dinosaurs. The current extinction event is called the *Holocene* or *Anthropocene*, so named because we humans are the cause of the reset. We have become far too “successful” for our own or the planet’s good. This current extinction has been underway for the past 10,000 years and is now accelerating dramatically.

Should we feel guilty about this (since humanity is to blame)? Should we excoriate ourselves for our selfishness? Some of us do (and I am often among them), but I think that's both wrong-headed and unproductive. The more relevant and important question for us now is whether or not we can consciously choose the long-term greater good over our immediate self-interest enough to change the outcome or even slow the process. And that is one hell of a problem.

The whole idea of the greater good is unnatural to any species. Lions (and tigers and bears, oh my!) are unconcerned with the maintenance of the wildebeest population that constitutes their food source. They engage in no considerations about the "health" of their environment. They just live. And it's the same with all species — we just live, doing whatever we do without concern for overall harmony. If the lions' prey diminishes in their local hunting grounds, they avoid dying off by migrating to a new environment. What they don't do is conserve or restock their food sources. That is far beyond the agency of their endowment.

Humans, however, are built differently. We are potentially aware of our effects on the overall homeostasis of the biosphere. Intellectually, we're able to consider our impact on the environment through perception and thought. It would appear that we're the only species so endowed, which makes us either unique or perhaps just odd. But perceiving and thinking about our impact on the environment are very different from successfully doing something about it. That, I fear, is beyond our capabilities. The reasons it's not likely to happen are not because we don't know enough or don't possess sufficient power. Sure, we've forgotten much of the healthier ways to live that were once commonplace, and our understanding of how the biosphere works still leaves much to be desired, but that could be changed. And as for industrial or technological power, we already have more than enough. No, knowledge and power are not insurmountable problems.

One powerful and overriding obstacle stands in our way, however: Humans aren't equipped biologically, psychologically, socially, or even spiritually to choose long-term collective good over short-term personal interest. Even as conditions worsen and life becomes more difficult and painful, I fear that "human nature" will make us unlikely to be able to shift that balance enough to make a real difference.

An old joke, famously retold by Woody Allen as a voiceover at the end of his 1977 movie "Annie Hall" goes like this: *This guy goes to a psychiatrist and says, "Doc, my brother's crazy, he thinks he's a chicken." The doctor says, "Well, why don't you turn him in?" And the guy says, "I would, but I need the eggs."*

Rim shot.

That's where we are now — painfully aware of an impending disaster that we can no longer be blissfully unaware of, and yet are effectively powerless to address and forestall, much less stop. The "eggs" we seem to need are, on the one hand, the recent ways of living we've invented over the past two centuries,

to which we have become accustomed (or perhaps addicted). Electricity is one obvious example among many, but the fundamental problem is that we've destroyed the harmony of the natural world by converting too much of the environment away from the life-reinforcing diversity of species habitat (which is self-regulating for homeostasis) and toward our own self-interested uses.

Could we give up those eggs and return to a simpler, saner way of living that might better allow preservation of the existing biosphere? Theoretically, yes, but more practically, probably not. Individually, some of us might choose to live more in harmony with nature, but collectively, we probably won't. And, unlike the lion, we can't migrate to new hunting grounds. So, we're stuck between a rock and a hard place.

The earth is responding to this imbalancing force of cumulative human disruption and toxicity in much the same way that our bodies respond to infection or inflammation — by heating up with a fever. We call it "global warming" or "climate change," but it's really just the earth reacting by becoming feverish.

If we vanish, will that be a tragedy? For us perhaps, but not in any larger sense. If Gaia does exist as a conscious entity, She is unlikely to experience the kind of sentimentality (i.e., attachment and clinging to transient forms) that humans feel. Homo sapiens will have had our hour to fret and strut upon the stage, and then be heard no more. So, should this "earth fever" cause humanity to go extinct, Mother Nature won't grieve for us. All species go extinct, and we will be no exception.

From the "spiritual" perspective that all life on earth might be an experiment in the development of consciousness, then our demise might signal a transition or an ending. What shape might follow I don't pretend to know. The Singularity? Artificial Intelligence? A global restart of life (by going back to Square One)? Or even the ultimate end of organic life on earth, leaving the earth barren and more like Mars or Venus? Numerous different scenarios have been suggested.

Is there any chance at all over the coming years that humanity might make an evolutionary leap and avoid this calamity? Doesn't appear very likely, given where we are today. Realistically, I think the odds of any "quantum leap" happening are slim or none. Despite this, our physical and intellectual endowments necessitate that we try to adapt and survive anyway. Although many people are saying (and will continue to say), "*Screw it, let's just party like it's 1999,*" I'm not among them. That's another side of "needing the eggs." We have to try. And so we will, however much we can.

This does not mean, however, that I hold out any hope for our success. I don't, but, as always, I could be wrong. Of course, I'll probably be dead before the jury is in on this one, but I'd be pleased as punch to be proven wrong.

In the meantime, we have to do all we can to move in the direction of the greater good, not just for humanity, but for all Life on earth.