

Human Ecology Informs Us How to Be Good at Being Human

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I got some newborn chickens this Spring. Right from the start they knew how to be chickens, Within days they were scratching the ground, pecking at things, practicing chirping patterns amongst themselves, and occasionally glancing up at the sky. They were very good at being chickens.

The situation for a newborn human is not so simple. Due to its unique physiology, the human cannot rely solely on its genetic ‘programming’ to determine its identity. The newborn human will undergo an elaborate cultural indoctrination in an effort to learn how to become human. Since culture is part of an ever-evolving life process, the indoctrination will never be complete, and the human will be continually re-inventing culture to adjust to changing needs. But by what criteria are we to evaluate whether, in the end, this culturally created human is actually good at being human? I contend that it is with the tools of a Human Ecology that this evaluation can be most meaningfully answered.

Human Ecology is the study of the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. No organism can live in a vacuum; each shapes and is shaped by its environment, and the human organism is no exception. At the deepest roots of our being, we are all interconnected with all other living existents in a lovely, delicate, intricate mosaic we call Nature – the Web of Life – and we can never completely separate from this. By its form and function, each living existent will have a unique role to play in this Web of Life.

In such a system, the well-being of each is enhanced by the well-being of all; that is, each organized whole is enlivened by the vitality of the larger wholes of which it is a part. It is not necessary to delineate explicitly just what the human role is in this vast network; it is enough to understand that the well-being of the human is enhanced by the increased well-being of the greater environment of which it is a part. According to these standards, then, to be good at being human is to act on this understanding and to work towards increasing the health and vitality of the greater Web of Life, thus increasing the health and vitality of each constituent human.

But the cultural indoctrination is deep and the human cannot survive without it. This reliance may produce static patterns that resist necessary evolution. Increased reliance on static patterns of culture produces tension within the overall system, and the relationship with the Web of Life can be strained because that life is continuing to evolve to meet its own needs nonetheless.

Look closely at the culture of the ‘advanced,’ modern, western, post-industrial, civilized human being. Such a human may spend 95% of its time enclosed within a human-made environment (usually square with artificial light). Its time may be fully occupied with superficial, human-made activities (jobs, the pursuit of abstract wealth, etc.). All its information may come through human filters with contrived human interests (TV, newspapers, etc.). As it sits around, it may be metabolizing synthetic drugs and food with artificial ingredients. Such a human will be almost completely disconnected from its natural environment, yet by cultural standards it will be considered very good at being human. How could this be?

It would seem that this modern human, caught up in the frantic effort to push civilization to its limit, is now being consumed by that very civilization. With such a blind singleness of purpose, the modern human has forgotten or ignored the fact that much of its identity and purpose is necessarily, inextricably linked to its role and function as a biological organism interconnected with all other living organisms in the vast Web of Life. By discounting this, and resisting necessary cultural evolution, the modern human continues to increasingly strain its relationship with Life.

The solution to this dilemma begins with an understanding of the principles of Human Ecology. What is required is the re-invention of culture to harmoniously blend the human enterprise with the natural environment. This fine balance can be best achieved through the conscious creation of ‘community.’ Despite the overuse of this term, the envisioned community does not yet exist. True community will be a time-place where human beings can fully relate to each other on a human scale and consciously work together to create a culture that recognizes, reinforces, and revitalizes the human relationship with the greater Web of Life.

In such a situation, all required, fundamental human needs could be satisfied. Then, human beings could go on to actualize their full potential – to fully realize what it means to be human being. In this way, like my spring chickens, the human being may effortlessly assume its role and function in the natural order of the cosmos and discover what it means to be good at being human.