

THE EVOLUTION OF CITIZEN YOU

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,
committed citizens can change the world.
...it’s the only thing that ever has.”*

– Margaret Mead

As human life has evolved on this little blue planet our relationship to nature and the world in general has also gone through some massive changes.

Basically, we’ve gone from being a part of the natural world to being apart from it.

Let’s take a quick and simplistic trip through the history of the evolution of *Homo sapiens* – ‘wise human’ – or *Homo sapiens sapiens* to give us our full and correct Latin name, though whether we deserve the title ‘wise wise humans’ will have to be judged by generations to come...

We started our evolution as just another primate, part of the food chain living much like any other species, living off what nature provided, and ourselves potential fodder for some of the fiercer predators.

Then, some time between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago, we became ‘wise’.

The Turning Point

What set early man apart from our rivals was our adaptability. We were able to learn from our experiences and quickly reproduce new behaviours that worked.

Imagine discovering you could scare off predators by threatening and possibly actually beating them with a stick. It’s not a huge leap of imagination (for a human) to think of using the stick for attack as well as defence. Suddenly humans could learn to hunt.

They might have thrown stones to defend themselves, and in the same way figured out they could use them to kill prey.

They could also have imagined how to combine the two technologies by lashing stones to sticks, creating the first clubs. Man had discovered the ability to make tools, and that would change the world forever.

So early man became a hunter-gatherer, using a range of skills to survive and thrive. There were no longer any serious predators.

Humans suddenly had become supreme.

Learning to Talk

What's incredible following these breakthroughs is how quickly Homo sapiens became able to adapt and develop this thinking into new concepts such as language, music and art. The growth of new parts of the brain – the neo-cortex – and enlargement of other parts, was in large part responsible for these significant leaps forward.

Once we became able to talk, language was able to evolve rapidly and become more nuanced, enabling greater expression, meaning-making and enquiry. Suddenly, we could articulate complex and abstract ideas.

We were getting so far removed from the other species on the planet – our planet – that we started to develop the concept of superiority. Now we were becoming the masters, and nature was there to serve us.

This took a further significant turn, around 10,000 years ago – a mere blink of the eye in evolutionary terms.

Settling Down

A whole load of developments took place at once to create a game-changing scenario. Most significantly:

- We learnt how to propagate crops and started to develop agriculture as we now know it;
- We became pastoralists by domesticating animals;
- And we learnt how to harness the power of fire to develop metals and turn them into tools.

This meant that, instead of having to lead a nomadic existence moving around in a constant quest for food, we could actually stay in one place and start living in settlements, heralding in the Neolithic era.

With the efficiency agriculture brought to food production, it was now actually possible to create surpluses, and this would have led to the early beginnings of trade.

But what is perhaps even more important is that, with this development of fixed settlements and surplus production, came the concept of ownership.

We had started to make the transition from being masters of the world to becoming its owner.

The Rise of Civilisation

The fact that we could now produce more than enough food to feed ourselves had two consequences that together resulted in the development of what we call civilisation.

Up to that time, the dominant member within a community might have had the power to decide on who gets what from the meagre rations available. Now there was abundance this considerably increased their ability to bestow extra on their favourites, and as the size of settlements increased, this gave rise to a new ruling class.

And as our ability to produce food increased, it also released labour that could be used for other things such as constructing ever larger buildings, creating a militia or policing the tax system that was needed to support the developing structures of the civil society.

What's so significant about civilizations is that, according to Wikipedia, they are characterized by 'a perceived separation from and dominion over the natural environment.'

So now, not only are we the world's masters and owners, we now start thinking of ourselves as separate from it.

The Quest for Dominance

As civilisations grew, so too did the ambitions of their leaders.

It turns out that humans are a territorial species, and a natural part of that is to seek the biggest territory possible.

The bigger a civilisation gets, the more capacity it has to expand. It's developed advanced systems of government, production and trade, and can easily handle more with little extra effort, due to the economies of scale. And with plenty of scope to raise and feed an army, world domination suddenly becomes an alluring proposition.

Over the millennia civilisations have risen and fallen, conquered and been conquered. Sometimes they've been overthrown by newer, stronger regimes, and sometimes they've been the victims of their own over-indulgence. They've become so successful they believe they're invincible, taking their eye off the ball as their cities crumble and decay.

Throughout 'civilized' history wars have continually raged, just as they still do today.

The Industrial Age

Despite all this warring – and sometimes because of it – technology and society had continued to advance. There have been periods of rapid innovation such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment in Europe.

But the changes that have had the most significant and far-reaching impact came in the 18th and 19th Centuries. The technological developments of this period paved the way for an unequalled period of rapid growth that has transformed this world of ours in so many ways – some good, others less so.

Firstly there was the agricultural revolution, which saw huge advances in mechanisation and other innovations such as crop rotation, that vastly increased yields and at the same time reduced labour requirements.

Hundreds of thousands of labourers were forced to leave the land and drift into the cities and towns to help feed the next big shift – the industrial revolution. As happened in agriculture, increased mechanisation and efficiencies were creating much higher levels of production, and a move to large-scale manufacturing. Economies of scale created cheaper goods, which fuelled huge increases in demand, and the labour was there to fulfil it.

This massive rise in consumption resulted in an equally massive scramble for resources – metals for use as raw materials, and coal to provide the motive power.

Now we had gone one step further in our relationship to the world, from separateness to becoming its exploiters.

The ‘Ascent of Man’

To sum up these transitions, our relationship to the world – planet Earth - has gone through the following stages:

- Part of nature
- Supreme species
- Masters of the world
- Owners of the world
- Separate from the world
- Exploiters of the world

We’ve already seen how civilization creates a sense of separateness from the Earth. Another consequence is that we start to gain a deeper sense of separateness from each other.

This has clear implications for how we function as a society.

Citizenship

What is our role as citizens?

Primarily it is to play our part in ensuring the social and economic systems function for the good of all.

We tend to think these days, of citizenship in the form of belonging to – being a citizen of – a particular country. What I mean by the term here, is the idea of us belonging within a social system, as would have been the case in the early days of city-states.

So as citizens we have a social responsibility, the very future of the social fabric is in our hands. That means we are under pressure to conform to social norms, to be law-abiding citizens, and avoid doing anything that could in any way destabilise our society.

If we choose to behave in ways that are inconsistent with accepted practice, we run the risk of being excluded. This can take the form of being shunned socially or excluded, being publicly reprimanded or humiliated, or being punished by imprisonment or physical abuse including torture or even death. None of these options are very appealing to most of us, so there is a powerful incentive to conform.

This is great for keeping things going in the right direction. The trouble is, it's equally good at keeping things going in the wrong direction.

This need to conform has over the years led to what is now referred to as 'groupthink'.

Groupthink occurs when group cohesion is considered the most important outcome above all others, creating results no-one wants in the interest of not 'rocking the boat'.

We indulge in groupthink all the time, often without being fully aware other than some sense of ill ease. That's why people get beaten up in the street while others just look on. They're all waiting to see what everyone else will do, so they do nothing. If the same thing happened with only a small number of others present, chances are they would intervene.

Groupthink can have disastrous consequences, as with the Titanic. And as happened in Nazi Germany. The German people – with a few exceptional Nazi zealots – didn't want to see the Jews exterminated, but they didn't dare break ranks. With good reason – the penalty was likely to be way more than mere ostracization unless everyone else joined in. When the concentration camps were liberated, Germans wept to think that they could have been part of such a barbaric behaviour. Let's not pretend it couldn't happen to us – you or I could get caught up in something like that just as easily.

In fact, it's groupthink that keeps us all, right now, heading towards the social and economic icebergs of the 21st Century. Just think of the room full of businessmen I told you about in the introduction.

Custodianship

I've mentioned the ill ease we tend to feel when we get caught up in groupthink. Where does that come from? Quite simply, it stems from a moral dilemma. Do I do what I believe is right, or do I conform to the behaviour of the group, which I believe is wrong?

This more than anything, explains the disconnects between individuals and the various systems. The increasing distance between the results the systems are creating – and we're participating in – and the results we want to see for ourselves, our children and society and the planet as a whole.

What we need is to start putting our moral responsibility at the heart of our thinking and our behaviour. We need to either replace or evolve our concept of citizenship so that we can behave in ways that are true to our moral codes whilst honouring the needs of others within our systems.

This requires another shift in our thinking and our relationship with the planet, from the concept of exploitation to one of custodianship.

To create a meaningful future for life on Earth, we have to become more conscious of our impacts both individually and collectively. That means taking full responsibility for the consequences of our actions – and inactions – now and into the future.

Seven Generations

The Native American Iroquois had a concept of Seven Generations Stewardship – 'The Great Law of the Iroquois' – where self-interest was secondary to the impact actions may have on people in seven generations time. Any great decision by the council had to pass the seven generations test. If an adverse impact would be created for the generations to come, then they would reject the proposal.

That's the kind of thinking we could really use right now.