



## THE KEY TO OUR FUTURE IS BURIED IN THE PAST Philosophical thoughts on saving us from ourselves

Peter Nilssen and Craig Foster

Imagine a world without fame, famine or fear, a world without waste, wars and mass extinction. Hard to imagine, and yet our ancestors lived in that world. Is it too much to imagine that we could get back to such a world? If we do not, then our future could be in serious doubt.

If human behaviour is responsible for the current status of society and the quality of life on earth, and if archaeology investigates the development of human behaviour, then our discipline should be central to understanding the present and to guiding the future of our species and life on earth.

An abundance of scientific data shows that in the last few millennia humans have placed life under severe stress and are expediting the sixth extinction event. It seems obvious then that the thrust of current research should focus on securing our future. Archaeology can be a key player in that regard. If human behaviour has brought us to this



Recreation – early human family crossing a lagoon on the South African south coast

point, and if science is suggesting that we are at the end game, then we have answers to the why and when. What remains unanswered is the how. How do

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we alter human behaviour to achieve function and sustainability?

The archaeological record is important because it is a road map of our development, with signs of where we have been, what we have done, what has worked and what has not. If our early ancestors survived and thrived in Africa prior to the introduction of food production and socio-political systems, then it is reasonable to suggest that their recipe for life worked. Currently our species is barely surviving and certainly not thriving; our recipe for life has failed. Maybe a glance at the past can provide some sorely needed wisdom and guidance. We are not suggesting a return to the Stone Age but rather a return to the original human ethos as a way to secure our future.

### Perspective

So where exactly does 'mighty man' fit into the big picture? If you overlay the lifespan of the known universe onto a calendar year, then it starts with the 'big bang' in January, 13,7 billion years ago. Our galaxy forms in the month of May and our solar system and simple life appear in September. Complex life flourishes in the month of December, with humans making their appearance at six minutes to midnight on New Year's Eve. At two minutes to midnight some people migrate from Africa and at about 22 seconds to midnight the origins of agriculture and food production, as well as complex societies, emerge.

In real time, humans first appeared about 200 000 years ago and the origins of food production occurred some 10 000 years ago. This means that humans lived in and connected with nature for at least 95 per cent of our time on earth. It is only for the last five per cent or so that we have been manipulating nature for our own short-term benefit, to the long-term detriment of life in general. It is hardly surprising then that most of us find comfort, peace and joy in nature as opposed to the discontent associated with the sights, sounds and smells of industry and modern life. Our deep-seated relationship with nature, and 95 per cent of our genetic coding and heritage, is part of the original human design – gatherer-hunters are at the core of who and what we are.



*!Kau Temi, a San gatherer-hunter in Namibia in 2002*

Most humans live in complex societies that are largely disconnected from nature and are characterised by neuroses and countless dysfunctional behaviours. Depression alone affects more than 300 million people worldwide. At its worst, depression leads to suicide. Close to 800 000 people commit suicide every year and it is the second leading cause of death in 15 to 29-year-olds. It seems logical to suggest that we were designed to be a part of nature rather than apart from it, to be guardians and keepers of nature rather than gardeners and manipulators that resulted in our industrialisation. In some industrialised cities, nearly 40 per cent of children suffer from irreparable lung damage, while millions around the world die from air pollution every year. The roadmap of our development suggests that we succeeded when we lived in nature and that we are failing in living on top of it.



*Masks help to deal with air pollution ten times higher than acceptable health limits in New Delhi, India*

### What distinguishes humans?

What sets us apart from other animals, what makes us uniquely human? Why have we created an industrial world, whereas animals have not? There are two primary aspects to humanness. The first involves our supposed advanced cognition, our ability to think and plan, our facility to develop composite tools, and to make sense of patterns and relationships in the world we occupy. We know of animals that use tools. Chimpanzees use 'fishing' sticks to extract termites from a termite mound. Birds drop shellfish or tortoises onto rocks to open them up for eating. Otters use stones to smash open shellfish to get to the meat.

But, although some animal species use tools, unless you teach them to do so, you will not find a chimpanzee binding together two sticks to make a longer fishing pole. This is what distinguishes us from other animals. Humans will take two or more separate components, ideas or observations and combine them to produce a single technology or a solution to a problem. We have the ability to make novel associations between separate items or ideas to create what we call composite tools. The bulk of our technology today consists of composite tools; the standard car has

25 000 separate parts.

The second characteristic that separates us from other animals involves symbolic behaviour. We know that animals use symbols, but they only do so to protect themselves, their territory and their reproduction. For example, African monkeys have a set of alarm calls for aerial or ground predators – each type of call is an auditory symbol of the species of predator they are warning about. Humans also use symbols for such reasons, but we take symbolic behaviour to a different level. We use it to express our position with respect to our understanding and perception of ourselves and the world we occupy.

We are constantly symboling through the clothes and jewellery we wear, the cars we drive, the houses we live in, the music we listen to, and so on. We symbol who we are and how we fit into the world according to the model of reality that is imprinted in us. Many humans today are symboling the level of 'success' they have achieved or would have others think they have achieved. The incessantly imprinted notion of a successful human being relates to the accumulation of external wealth and power. Institutions such as governments, corporations and most organised religions are huge on symboling as well.

The start of symbolic behaviour was the first step towards creating the tools that led to our industrial life today. However, early humans used symbolism sparsely, whereas today we use it to such a degree that we have completely lost touch with what is real. Nature is real and immersed in nature we feel present and alive. Industrial city life is illusionary in comparison and disturbing at some levels to our primal design.

Comprehending and internalising this is critical for understanding the mind of our earliest ancestors, as well as for obtaining meaningful interpretations of the prehistoric archaeological record. Since the start of food production and the development of complex society our mindset is that of ego: self-seeking and intent on the manipulation and domination of nature. We are driven to the infinite consumption of finite resources. This situation is radically different from that which pertained in the prehistoric period. We can thus surmise that a major component of the human dilemma and a major cause of our failure to care for the environment results from our disconnection from it. We have clouded and forgotten the original human design, namely to fit in with nature.

### **Beliefs**

Prior to the origins of food production and before the advent of complex societies, the vast bulk of human societies based their belief systems in Animism. In this system, which is still practised today, a life force is attributed to everything that exists, including the elements, plants, insects, animals and earth itself. Everything is revered and considered critical to the

chain of being. In the past, the belief system was mirrored in the experiences of the majority of indigenous people worldwide, all of whom practised community-based altered-state healing. As a practitioner's awareness expands, it is common to experience a profound lack of separation, where the entire known world is perceived as one sentient living form. This experience has been repeated across the ages.

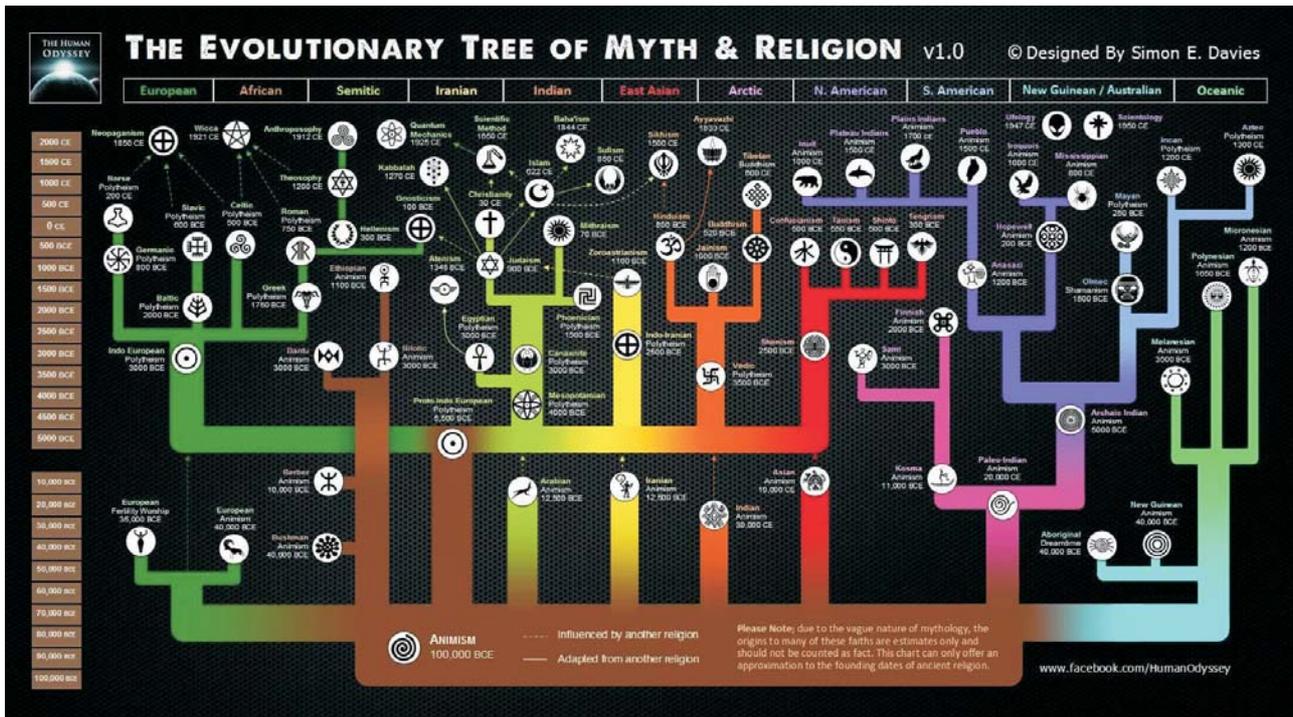
Most of the world's great spiritual leaders report very similar experiences of oneness. This experience in many ways is much more real than normal wakefulness as the psyche's ability grows exponentially during heightened awareness. The so-called real world of everyday human existence often feels like an illusion in comparison with this expanded state. It follows that the behaviour of these early ancestors was guided by a reverence for and consciousness of all life, and that their very lives depended on a functional relationship with nature.

Central to Animism is the hunter-gatherer 'trance dance'. It is not the prehistoric equivalent of today's trance parties in which people take recreational drugs and dance to loud music. Rather, through repetitive rhythmic dancing to clapping-singing-chanting-percussion around a fire, the trance dancers aim to reach an altered state of awareness, which they describe beautifully as 'the little death', the death of the ego. It is during these altered states that people have visions of entoptic phenomena and therianthropes.



*Entoptic phenomena in the Northern Cape*

Therianthropes are beings or entities that are part human and part animal. Most people are familiar with the therianthropes represented in Egyptian art – human bodies with animal or bird heads. We know these creatures never lived and their appearance in rock art around the world is thus an oddity; they are unnatural, mythical. A second unnatural element in rock art, but one that also occurs around the globe, is entoptic phenomena. These include cross-hatchings, zigzags, nested curves, spirals and other geometric shapes. Entoptic phenomena are images not observed by the eye, but are generated internally by the brain, usually during altered states.



The roots of human belief systems are grounded in Animism – Oneness

During trance states people achieve the overview or connectedness effect that reinforces the belief system founded in Animism. People in trance connect with the spiritual realm and their ancestors, they obtain treatments for healing, guidance, teaching, wisdom and so on. These elements are then imprinted in the community and provide the basis for a functional relationship with nature. Because we find therianthropes and entoptic phenomena in art all over the world, this means that early societies were all reaching these elevated states of awareness and representing that experience through art, music, stories and other symbols. Since Animism is the best candidate for a global belief system before 10 000 years ago, we think that many symbols in art relate to Animism.



A Ju/hoan San trance dance in Namibia

**Ancient evidence and our current status**

Several South African Middle Stone Age sites dating to 100 000 or more years ago contribute to our understanding of our very deep human origins. The combined results of archaeological investigations into

these sites reveal that early humans deployed advanced cognitive abilities and symbolised knowledge and belief systems guided by and connected to nature. The variety of entoptic phenomena on ochre, ostrich egg shell and bone suggests that these people were involved in altered-state practices and were very likely associated with Animism. Looking at our origins reveals that our early ancestors had at least two ingredients in their recipe for success, namely a combination of cognition (intelligence) and symbolic behaviour (beliefs or spirituality).

So, what is the contemporary standing of our species? The status of society and its constructs are a perfect reflection of great intelligence in the absence of wisdom. The overall emphasis on the development of intelligence and efficiency, and the near absence of authentic spiritual development has resulted in a notable and often crippling imbalance in the human psyche. The ingredient we have lost is the spiritual aspect of what makes us human. It is this spiritual bankruptcy, evidenced by fame, famine, fear, wars, abuse of everything and lack of reverence that has brought our species to its knees, that has robbed us of our humanness.

After food production, the evolutionary tree of belief systems becomes top heavy and complex, with the emergence of thousands of different religions and denominations. Christianity alone boasts several thousand denominations. Mostly these religions view humans as the pinnacle of 'evolution' who have the self-appointed right to dominate and control. This is in stark contrast to the ethos of Animism, which is still practised by many so-called primitive societies around the globe, who retain their connection with

nature and maintain a caring and gentle attitude towards life and earth. If Animism was the global belief system prior to food production and if we can push the beginnings of symbolic behaviour back to the emergence of humans, then at least 95 per cent of our genetic coding and heritage concerning belief systems relates to Animism. At our core we are all Animists, carrying remnants of a profoundly imprinted mindset and way of life based on a reverent and functional relationship with nature.



• *Peter Nilssen with visitors at the Middle Stone Age site discovered by him, Cave 13B at Pinnacle Point*

The big question facing us now is whether it is possible for us to change? The answer lies with understanding our fundamental nature and behaviour. There are two primary drivers of human behaviour. The first involves an ancient portion of the brain known as the 'reptilian complex'. This is responsible for our instinctive behaviours for survival, such as obtaining nourishment, the fight or flight response, the drive to procreate, protection and so on. These behaviour patterns are fixed in us physiologically, as they are in all animals, and cannot be altered easily.

The second and more subtle driver of human behaviour is our knowledge and belief systems. The good news is that this feature is not fixed and can be altered since these systems are learned through the process of imprinting. The process of imprinting works through repetition. For example, we learn language through the repetition of a word and an associated object or concept. After a period of regular repetition, the word and associated meaning become imprinted in the conscious and subconscious minds. So, when we speak our mother tongue, we need not think much about individual words or their sequence, but rather think about the ideas or information that we wish to convey. The sequence and choice of words flow quite naturally by means of the subconscious mind. The same is true for learning the multiplication tables.

It is critical to understand that our habits and tendencies are driven primarily by the subconscious, not the conscious mind. It is the process of imprinting that is responsible for the palette of the subconscious

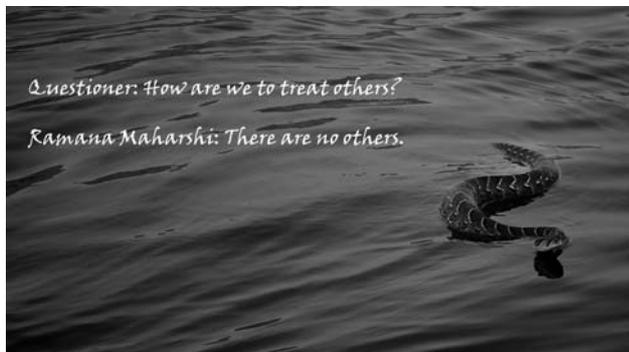
mind with which our models of reality are constructed. Unlike the conscious mind, the subconscious mind does not discriminate between what is real and what is not, nor does it choose between what is functional and what is not. It will take whatever information it receives and work with it, creating a model of reality deep within us that drives our habits and tendencies. The world of marketing and propaganda is very familiar with these processes, and corporations use this characteristic of human nature to their advantage. The success of marketing depends on repetition, on imprinting, and because it works large sums of money are invested in this regard.

A demonstration that it works on the subconscious level was the use of subliminal advertising during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By inserting one frame displaying a product in every 24 frames of film, corporations could virtually compel their audience to consume specific products. In this process, the conscious mind misses the single frame, but the subconscious mind sees it and works with it. During interval, the subconscious mind induces the observer to purchase a product that the conscious mind never noticed. This practice is illegal today, but instead advertisers and manufacturers now invest millions of dollars to cunningly stimulate the subconscious. One basic example is the seemingly simple chocolate bar that has undergone enormous production and design. It explodes the sensory part of our brain with its texture, look, taste and smoothness, blowing the circuitry of a primal system designed to enjoy and moderate subtle taste and texture. Enormous self-restraint is required by our primal minds to resist the onslaught of this million-dollar deadly design.

Our knowledge and belief systems are imprinted in us from a very young age through our parents, peers, cultures, religious and education systems, and the mainstream media. We are imprinted with the notion that we are separate from everything, including nature and each other, and that we are successful human beings if we can accumulate external wealth and power. We are thus imprinted to be part of an ego-based consumer society with only a secondary regard for nature, the environment and fellow human beings. Our resultant behaviour is causing the death of our oceans and the onset of the sixth mass extinction. Humans are the single most dangerous mammal on the planet, responsible for more human deaths than any other, yet, ironically, very fragile compared with many other smaller species. Some scientists predict human extinction within a few hundred years unless radical change occurs in human behaviour.

All this relates to a tiny fraction – five per cent or less, or less than one per cent if we include the hominin lineage – of our time on earth. For the balance of our past we were imprinted with the notion of the interconnectivity of all things and reverence for life; it was these nature-based knowledge and belief systems that allowed our species to thrive. The inter-

connectivity of all, the law of one, as taught by spiritual leaders since the dawn of time, is now supported by quantum physics, which states that at the foundation of it all there is only one thing, a singularity, a unified field of energy, one intelligence, one consciousness. Everything is connected.



*Spiritual leader Ramana Maharshi responds to a question*

### Hope?

Understanding that knowledge and belief systems are a major driver of human behaviour, and that these are learned rather than fixed, is a great source of hope. For this can result in transformed behaviour towards ourselves and the world we occupy. We can change our knowledge and beliefs on the individual level and make a difference as individuals. Every one of us is part of creating the collective human consciousness and we are either adding to the dysfunction and insanity or subtracting from it. A part of our role as individuals in transforming the present model of reality is to take responsibility for our lives and behaviour. We can no longer afford to hand this responsibility over to a 'father figure' like God, or government, or gold. Work in this direction is already underway and effective systems for imprinting already exist.

A further reason for hope is the concept of a tipping point, or critical mass. We do not need to change the more than seven billion of us to effect a change in human awareness and behaviour. Pilot studies suggest that only a small portion of a population is required to effect a change in the whole population. Several scientific experiments have yielded positive results, but further work must be done. Over 40 scientific papers document the Maharishi Effect, including that of 7 000 people concentrating on positive thoughts and energy and inducing a 72 per cent worldwide reduction in acts of terror, which is hugely encouraging.

This phenomenon can be explained through the hypothesis of a field effect of consciousness. It suggests an underlying connection between individual people in a similar way that physics has shown greater unity beneath the diversity of matter and energy fields. The more powerfully that underlying field is enlivened, the greater the unifying effect of peace and harmony on the surface levels of human existence.

### Conclusion

The point is simply this: we stand at the tipping point: either we change our habits and tendencies, or our future is in serious doubt. Change is possible but it needs to happen now through a trans-disciplinary approach to answer the simple question: can we change human behaviour on a global scale and how do we do it? The archaeological record is a key part of the story as it indicates what behaviours worked for us in the past. Other environmental and behavioural sciences will illuminate the way forward.

Studies of our distant *Homo sapiens* ancestors reveal vital beings operating at a very high level of health and cognition. We have been sold the idea that these early people of our species were brutal cave dwellers, but the archaeological record paints a different picture. In many ways, early human behaviour was bright and vibrant. In comparison with this, the human of today is dull and broken, often a shadow of his former self in mind and body. But we still carry the same genes and have the same potential to overcome centuries of upheaval and mass extinction. We have a tremendous skill to transform and to work together in large groups for the good of all.

It is very likely our deep origins are rooted in non-violence and altruism. These are the traits that the great Mandela used to transform a nation. There is no reason it cannot be done on a global scale. In fact, it will most likely be a prerequisite if our species is to survive the next few hundred years.



## ARCHAEOLOGY IN BRIEF

### Central Turkey: 8 000-year- old female figurine

Whoever she was, she had achieved celebrity status. At Catalhoyuk, the largest and best preserved Neolithic and Chalcolithic proto-city settlement in Turkey, archaeologists have discovered a rare stone figurine of a woman about 8 000 years old. Only a handful of statuettes of the era have been found in one piece. The 177 mm high figurine was found beneath a platform with a piece of obsidian, which suggests that it may have been placed there as part of some ritual. Such figurines are often thought of as fertility goddesses.



*Catalhoyuk figurine dating to 8 000 years ago (credit: Jason Quinlan, Stanford University, via Associated Press)*

The archaeologists, however, suggest the object represents older women who have achieved status. A Unesco World Heritage site, Catalhoyuk was occupied from about 6300 BC to 5500 BC. Archaeological research has been conducted there since 1961.

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