

HOME TO THE PLEISTOCENE

Paul Shepard argues in *Coming Home to the Pleistocene* (1998) that however totally humans have transformed earth's culture and ecology, their own genetic makeup remains basically unchanged, since genes evolve so slowly.

The Pleistocene refers to human prehistory before agriculture began, about 10,000 B.C. Our homo sapiens genome, shaped during 500,000 years of foraging, may yearn still for that lost world.

Today, Shepard argues, most humans sense little kinship with nonhuman life. Except as food, threats, entertainment or domesticated companions, we find other life forms irrelevant. With our “skyscraper mentality” we dream of a subjugated natural world, transcended by the human spirit. We see progress as inevitable, along with dominion over or exemption from the laws of nature. We can be anything, live anywhere, remake the planet to our taste.

In fact, the mess we've made of contemporary life suggests we may be maladapted to living in a human-shaped world. We need to escape “the trap of industrial productivity, corporate blight, and demographic insanity.” We've become abundant in the way of rodents – not true to our large mammal, slow-breeding genome, and hence terribly destructive.

With the advent of agriculture, we took a wrong turn. As agriculturalists we became nurturers of seeds and cattle, as we had been nurtured by our mothers; we adopted a life of accumulation and control. Through domestication we achieved, at best, genetic suppression. Because of the poorer nutritional value of agricultural food, our health deteriorated, our stature shrank, we died younger. We experienced feast or famine, epidemics, increased parasites, alternating peace and social conflict, and slowly collapsing ecosystems.

And we alienated ourselves from our surroundings. We replaced multiple animal and earth deities with humanized sky gods. And once above it all, we began skinning earth, seeing it not as our nurturer but as something to be exploited for our glorification.

Once dangerously enmeshed in the world's complexity, we now began to simplify and level it, distancing ourselves from nature through art, rationality, linear and mathematical perspectives. We entered history.

Because it's incomplete and discontinuous, history is in fact made up, and hence myth, but we think of it as "what happened," as linear and irreversible. Thus we could no longer resolve change or death, for thousands of years explained as renewal in a constantly recurring present – the Great Round. History rejected these earth-centered beliefs that sought to

reconcile opposites, nature as womb and tomb, in exchange for reason and progress.

We came to think of ourselves not as participants in earth's cycles, along with all its other inhabitants, but as controllers of its destiny, and thus, inevitably, became alienated and homeless. We began a war against nature which continues to this day.

Yet our genome, Shepard reminds us, is as old as life and connected to everything, from the first bacteria on. We all came from the same source. To regain our awareness of this, and start cooperating with earth's processes instead of trying to control them, he suggests adapting key features of the Pleistocene world view.

As foragers in a dangerous world, we were wired for cooperation and mutual dependence. The challenging, rich, earthbound wild milieu our ancestors faced, adapted to and survived, created our minds. We gained esteem through sharing and giving food, not through hoarding and exploitation as we do now. Social differentiation occurred along lines of age, gender and ability, not, as now, along lines of wealth and power.

Everyone gained intimate knowledge of wild nature from childhood on, and revered nature as numinous and oracular. "Diffused sacredness," Shepard says, "a strong sense of

transformation, and unhistorical time constitute the Paleolithic genius.”

That’s what’s still etched on our minds, like cave paintings; that’s what we need to come home to.