

THE WILD LIFE OF OUR BODIES

Biologist Rob Dunn, in *The Wild Life of Our Bodies: Predators, Parasites, And Partners That Shape Who We Are Today* (290pp, Harper Collins, 2011) suggests that modern humans continue to mold their lives in response to ghosts – stimuli gone, sometimes, for eons. We’ve changed our cultures, diets and behavior but “our bodies remember who we are,” thousands of generations later, for good or ill.

Why is it that after generations of living increasingly longer and healthier lives, we’ve now reversed those trends, especially in the most developed nations? Maybe partly because we don’t walk barefoot in the dirt anymore -- up to the 1930’s and 40’s half of U.S. kids had intestinal parasites. Maybe, when there are no parasites, our immune systems turn on the body itself – chasing ghosts. Those worms may be not just parasites, but species we evolved to interact with, species our bodies now miss. Some sufferers of Crohn’s disease, diabetes, heart disease and multiple sclerosis actually got better when parasitic worms were re-introduced to their guts.

Why are we hairless, thus inviting more exposure to UV rays, more difficulty staying warm, and presenting an appearance of smallness? Maybe because anciently more hair meant more habitat for fleas, ticks, lice and other parasites which transmit disease. So those with less hair survived better.

Thanks to bacteria in our guts that have plant digesting enzymes we don’t have, we can get 30% more calories from our food. In lean years these bacteria helped our ancestors survive. But where food is plentiful for most, as

in modern developed countries, this advantage can lead to obesity.

Scientists have compiled a list of attributes common to all humans – among them our taste for sweets, salt and fat. Since 2005 we've known that most of our taste buds are in our stomachs, and send signals directly to the body. Therefore much – perhaps most – of our yearning for these never reaches the conscious mind. We continue to discuss world hunger, yet devote one California-sized area to sugar cane and sugar beets, and another to corn, for high fructose cane syrup, though once refined the sugar has almost no food value. We're victims of our taste buds, which continue to tell us what we needed long, long ago.

Why are we often xenophobic to the point of warring on each other? Maybe, Dunn suggests, because we learned early to flee people who were sick. Now, though we've gained some control over most diseases, our unconscious minds and our immune systems may continue always to see “ourselves” as healthy, and anyone foreign as a threat.

All species shape their worlds out of sensory reports, and ours are mostly visual. Ancient fear of predators, especially snakes, may have led to acute full color vision and then to bigger brains – and alarm calls to language. Long a prey species, we continue to shape our world as if we were still hunted – creating neuroses triggered by ghosts.

We think of ourselves as complex, but not complexly related to other species. Yet our bodies ache for the ecological context in which they existed for millennia.

We may, Dunn suggests, build skyscraper cities because we once lived in caves on cliffs, to shelter from the elements and avoid predators. Yet they need not always be

castles in the air, floating on fears of long gone threats. We can build real vertical jungles in our cities to lure wildlife, and feed ourselves with skyscraper hydroponic farms.

We've built a world in response to unconscious fears and preferences. Now let reason shape it consciously for the betterment of all life – with the help of biologists' stories about our ancient selves.