

Waking Up From Scare City

May 1st, 2020

I knew that the Golden Age was all about me,
and it was we who had been blind to it,
but that it had never passed away from the world.

A.E.

How will we feed 8 billion people? Are we destined for *apocollapse*? Now, more than ever, the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

I am a forager. I gather much of my food from nature. I am the founding director of the largest foraging education organization in the world. For 15 years, I sold several hundred pounds of wild mushrooms a year to over 75 restaurants. As I have come to see it, we live in a Garden of Eden, one that can feed us all.

Foraging has taught me that the “root of all evil” is *biophobia*: fear of nature, and more broadly, fear of life. We don’t experience providence. We believe we live in an unfriendly world. We believe in scarcity, so we live in “Scare City.”

Scare City is a place of insecurity, struggle, hoarding and [competition](#). But scarcity is an artificial construct, an [illusion](#). The wealth is there, just not the willingness to share it. Once we start charging each other for things, suddenly there’s not enough for everyone. One of these new expenses is food.

We haven’t always had to pay for food. Like clean water, it used to be free. In fact, the people we call “primitive” today lived in a gift economy. They didn’t charge each other for anything because Nature didn’t charge them either. When you don’t have to pay for your basic needs, you can live on less than \$2 a day and [not be poor](#).

We can reclaim this abundance through sharing: not just renting out what we own, but true sharing. We can partake of what Mother Nature has to share, free of charge: the freshest, finest, all-natural organic food that money can’t buy.

Anthropologists studying hunter-gatherer societies universally agree that they work [far less](#) than we do. That’s if you even consider hunting and gathering “work.” For a forager, summertime or not, the living is easy. There is enough for everyone, so everyone shares. And [because](#) everyone shares, there is enough for everyone. Here is one account from a 17th century [missionary](#) to



“say, can I have some of your purple berries?”

present-day Quebec:

In the famine through which we passed, if my host took two, three, or four beavers, immediately, whether it was day or night, they had a feast for all neighboring savages. And if those people had captured something, they had one also at the same time; so that, on emerging from one feast, you went to another, and sometimes even to a third and a fourth. I told them that they did not manage well, and that it would be better to reserve these feasts for future days, and in doing this they would not be so pressed with hunger. They laughed at me. ‘Tomorrow we shall make another feast with what we shall capture.’

Descriptions like this suggest that nature-based peoples didn’t think they lived in a “dog eat dog” world. They seem to have lived the Bible’s teaching instinctively:

Do not worry about your life, about what you will eat or drink... Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

We like to think so. Yet, compared to hunter-gatherers, most members of the “first world” are barely scraping by. Which of us is, to borrow from Bob Dylan, [having to be scrounging](#) for their next meal?

Hunter-gatherers are not only more communal; they’re also more playful. No activity is considered a chore. Foragers don’t even have [a concept](#) of “work.”

We, on the other hand, the denizens of Scare City, live in competition. There is a place in life for healthy competition, just as in any sport or game. But life is no longer fun and games when we feel threatened. The question is, do we *need* to feel threatened?

When you take this matter to the extreme, you have to wonder, is the universe “friendly?” Is life even worth living? These are very relevant issues, very real doubts that many people have today. More than one in ten Americans are now [on anti-depressants](#). More people are dying [of suicide](#) than in car accidents.

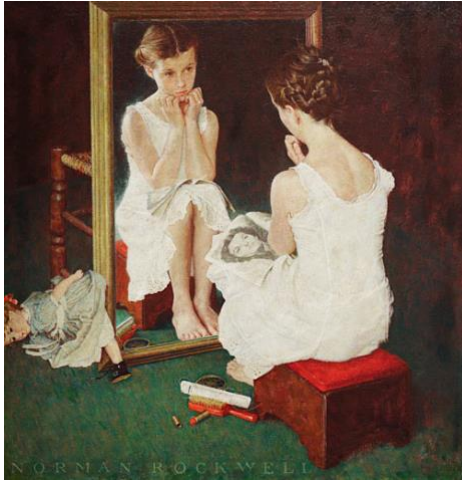
Nature-based cultures [don’t seem to have](#) these issues. You could say they live ‘in the palm of God’s hand.’ The more you see nature as your Provider, the less you see the world as an enemy. Native Americans, for example,

did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and the winding streams with tangled growth as “wild.” Only to the white man was nature a wilderness and only to him was the land infested with wild animals and savage people. For us, the land was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with blessings of the Great Mystery.

Chief Luther Standing Bear

Hunter-gatherers enjoy true *home-land security*. Their [incomparable health](#) and well-being, as documented by [Weston Price](#) and others, speaks for itself. Which of us, then, lives in the “real world?”

Our life of scarcity is largely contrived. We have bred scarcity in our food by selectively



measuring up (Norman Rockwell)

breeding crops. One study, for instance, found that on urban farms, two thirds of the plants considered “weeds” are edible. In fact, these “weeds” add up to no less than 40% of the food available. This means that almost half the food on a farm [goes uneaten](#). I once asked a group of farmers which were their most problematic weeds, and eight out of ten were edible. We have narrowed the range of what we eat, and our health has [declined accordingly](#).

We have bred scarcity with our thinking. Once you decide (or [the media](#) convinces you) that only certain things can make you happy, you narrow your chances of satisfaction considerably. The pervasive anxiety that results from this selectivity is endemic to civilization. It has certainly curtailed my own life.

Growing up, I thought I was smart. After all, I went to Princeton. Fast-forward two decades, and I’m dishing out \$3000 for dental work resulting from a lifetime of jaw clenching, heartburn, and other symptoms of chronic stress.

I grew up in a suburban Jewish family with a long [history of hypervigilance](#) and the worship of money that results from it. I too am a product of fear. Is that fear justified? It doesn’t matter how humans lived 10,000 years ago if that way of life is no longer an option. Is it? Can there really be enough food in nature for 8 billion of us?

We can’t all just hunt and gather. But we can’t keep doing what we’re doing now either. The solution is neither foraging nor farming; it’s *permaculture*. Permaculture is a cross between foraging and agriculture. It means working [with nature](#), not against it. It mean growing — or rather, *managing* — what thrives in an area without needing a [life support system](#). “Weeds” are a prime example. The basic question permaculture answers is, *do we have to grow food or does food grow itself?*

I have seen the answer. We live in paradise. There is [enough for everyone](#). Most of human “progress” has been, to borrow from James Joyce, a nightmare from which it’s time to wake. We don’t have a hunger problem; we have an *Eden disorder*. But it’s not incurable. We can turn this world around when we see it for what it is.

“For Zen students,” says Shunryu Suzuki, “a weed is a treasure.” That treasure lies hidden in plain sight. We come back to reality when we go off the eaten path. When we go “by the graze of God,” we rediscover Providence. We find that life is good after all.

I think if God is dead, he’s laughed himself to death. Because, you see, we live in Eden. Genesis has got it wrong; we’ve never left the garden. Look about you: this is paradise. It’s hard to see, I grant you, but it’s here. Under our feet. Beneath the surface, all around us. There is everything we want. The earth is shining underneath the soot.

James Goldman

How does our garden grow? The Earth shines from the light of the sun. And what does the sun shine from? As Hafiz points out, “the sun never says to the earth, you owe me. Look what happens with a love like that: it lights up the world.” That love runs through creation.

Oh, daisies, crowding all the fields,
And twinkling grass, and buds that grow,
Each glance you greet with smiles so sweet.
“And why?” “Ah, would you know?”

Their beauty to my heart, replied,
“For someone else we live,
And nothing in this world so wide
Is sweeter than to give!”

George Cooper, “The Reason Why”

Giving is sweet because we are all in this together. All existence is one. To be afraid is to forget that basic truth. And when you lose that awareness, it’s the beginning of the end. Scared or shared, Eden or Scare City: that’s our choice. It’s all for one or [none for all](#).

It’s not too late. Like Keats says, “the poetry of Earth is never dead.” We may have been prodigal, but all is forgiven. Like clear air, the crystal waters, and the mothers who catch our tears, Earth nourishes and receives us without exception. She waits for us with open arms, for us to come home.