

## Address: What Makes Us Human?

The science we heard in the reading is evidence that being human has two very striking and distinctive characteristics. One is that, unlike any other creature on this planet, we sometimes (I quote) "engage in highly complex co-ordinated group activities with people who are not kin to us and who may even be complete strangers". Like playing a game of rugby for your country. Like canvassing in an election campaign. Like joining a tour group when visiting a cathedral. All these are examples of how people co-operate for a common purpose with other people who are not kin, and whom they may not know at all.

....

and if someone new came in through the door at this moment, unarmed and non-threatening, one or more of us would offer them a seat and a hymn-book with words and gestures to make it possible for them to begin to find common ground with us..... Even if the person were wearing a hijab and spoke no English.... though perhaps in that case with more uncertainty in our minds that they were in the place they intended to be.

The other striking and distinctive human trait, according to the science report, is the willingness to wage war. The potential we have as humans is to identify and label group differences, and seek to exterminate or expel those who are not in "our group".

We can differentiate "us" from "them" by some characteristic with a genuine cultural meaning, such as a different language, or sect of a religion, or form of government, or who lives on which side of a boundary. We can also label ourselves and others into "us" and "them" by some wholly silly factor such as skin colour.

Now, according to the science we heard, these two traits – war-making and co-operation, distinguish us, homo sapiens, from other types of humans that used to live in Europe and Asia; and also from other animals. And BOTH characteristics evolved together about 70,000 years ago. Both co-operativeness AND fighting – specifically fighting in which a group of people defines itself as "us" and others as "them", as "the enemy" – are what make us human.

Incidentally, we have a third trait that co-evolved. We do like to be beside the seaside. The people who spread from Africa to everywhere after the global cooling 60 to 70 thousand years ago lived by the coast. Their descendants who migrated out of Africa lived mostly near the coast. When they came to Europe, they colonised the Greek islands and Portugal first. And the deep continent – Russia and NE Europe – last. Another climate shift led to the dominance of SE Asia by coast dwellers. And today too: most of the world's large cities are on or within easy reach of the coast.

I daresay we here would all prefer more co-operativeness and no wars. So the important question is: if our evolution has sown seeds of both tendencies in our basic make-up as human beings, what helps a person, or a group of people, towards co-operativeness, towards peacefulness?

You'll remember the last point in the science article was "culture can over-ride even the strongest biological instincts". The point Curtis Marean, the author, wants to make is the positive side of that fact: we can **choose**.

Choose what?

I am convinced it doesn't begin with politics – things like peace treaties and trade agreements. I reckon those are outcomes, fruits, but the **roots** grow – or don't grow – **within** each one of us. I invite you to consider the possibility that everything begins with thought. And therefore that if we want peace, we have to make peace. We have to be **peacemakers**. I am a spiritual being. You are here, so you too sense that you are spiritual beings.

Spirituality is one very important other characteristic of human beings that (as far as is known) is not shared by other animals. Spiritual life is part of every human society, past and present.

Anti-religious commentators, of course, love to tell us that religion has been a cause of many wars and of inhuman actions.

But that is when religion is **ab**used to mark out "them/us" divisions between groups of people. That's spiritual life mis-shapen, spirituality warped by power, egos, politics, male hierarchical organisations. Spiritual life diseased.

Spiritual life **free from** those poisons, is quite the opposite. Great prophets and teachers of spiritual wisdom don't make war on each other. Spirituality guided by wisdom and love is the ultimate unifier. It seems clear that great souls who live entirely on the plane of deep wisdom and love never quarrel with each other. They're much too close at heart to the Source, to what some Unitarians call the Divine Unity.

Genuine spirituality, then, unites.

And we can all, you and I, choose to apply our spirituality in the service of peace.

How?

I invite you to allow the thought that persistent spiritual action, frequent, sustained spiritual action, might be by far the biggest contribution for peace that any of us can make.

What kind of spiritual action?

Firstly, all who will can meditate. Make our own mind a haven of peace. Make peace by deepening our contact with what the women who lead this congregation's meditation group call "the Source of Tranquillity". Imagine now, just for a moment, what the world would be like if **everyone** felt deep contact with the Source of Tranquillity **all the time**.

*(Pause)*

Or even once a day.

Just imagine.

And how can we get from *now* to **this**?

Where can we start from, other than where we are? The industrial revolution, the entire modern economy the length and breadth of the whole world, began with **one** iron bridge (in Shropshire). The peaceful revolution began in the silent depths of **one soul**. We can add our own selves to the peaceful revolution: we can learn to meditate, all who will, and then day by day deepen our practice.

What else?

We can affirm; we can energise peace. We can visualise and send energy, like we did today. Send Light, send love, send vibrations of peace. When heart and mind are one, for good, we energise good thoughts, we add to the good in the world.

Godly, atheist, or in-between as you may be, consider how the power of good thoughts can make a difference. Does changing the way you think change yourself? Does you changing yourself change those around you?

Studies, family systems work for example, suggest it does. Perhaps it affects how one gets along with others. It could be that one might grow in the art of noticing and recognising when someone else has hurt feelings. Or the art of calming aggression, one's own or someone else's. Or the art of helping people to feel included in the group.

Do changes like this ripple out into the world, for good?

And we can be conscious of peacefulness and peace making in our lives. What does today look like on a measure of peace-making?

Loving? kind? patient?

Quarrelsome? Full of "but I want"?

And if you are a theist, you can pray; and not just on Sunday mornings. Pray with confidence that prayer is a strong action – and a first choice action, not a last resort. Pray, if you are a theist, with the conviction that the Divine is listening. Pray with the conviction that the Divine feels what is in our hearts.

Call it the Divine Unity, call it the Goddess of love, call it Jesus Christ, Allah, Brahman or Buddha - that's between you and It - but **call it**. Call it to mind. Call it with your heart. Close the space between you and the Greater Wholeness however you understand it, and however much or little you understand it.

That is your true spirituality!

And as you close that space, you are in an inner temple of stillness, a Mecca of quiet, which is the **meeting-house of all religion**. In that awareness, there is no "them and us": there is only One. As one recent Indian spiritual leader put it, "one plus one plus one, plus one, equals One. We are all One."

Amen