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Learning from Ladakh

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Why is the world teetering from one crisis to another? Has it always been like this? Were things worse in the past? Or better? Experiences over more than sixteen years in Ladakh, an ancient culture on the Tibetan Plateau, have dramatically changed my response to these questions. I have come to see my own industrial culture in a very different light.

Before I went to Ladakh, I used to assume that the direction of “progress” was somehow inevitable, not to be questioned. As a consequence, I passively accepted a new road through the middle of the park, a steel-and-glass bank where the two-hundred year old church had stood, a supermarket instead of the corner shop, and the fact that life seemed to get harder and faster with each day. I do not any more. Ladakh has convinced me that there is more than one path into the future and given me tremendous strength and hope.

In Ladakh I have had the privilege to experience another, saner way of life and to see my own culture from the outside. I have lived in a society based on fundamentally different principles and witnessed the impact of the modern world on that culture. When I arrived as one of the first outsiders in several decades, Ladakh was still essentially unaffected by the West. But change came swiftly. The collision between the two cultures has been particularly dramatic, providing stark and vivid comparisons. I have learned something about the psychology, values, and social and technological structures that support our industrialized society and about those that support an ancient, nature-based society. It has been a rare opportunity to compare our socioeconomic system with another, more fundamental, pattern of existence - a pattern based on a coevolution between human beings and the earth.

Through Ladakh I came to realize that my passivity in the face of destructive change was, at least in part, due to the fact that I had confused culture with nature. I had not realized that many of the negative trends I saw were the result of my own industrial culture, rather than of some natural, evolutionary force beyond our control. Without really thinking about it, I also assumed that human beings were essentially selfish, struggling to compete and survive, and that more cooperative societies were nothing more than utopian dreams.

It was not strange that I thought the way I did. Even though I had lived in many different countries, they had all been industrial cultures. My travels in less “developed” parts of the world, though fairly extensive, had not been enough to afford me an inside view. Some intellectual travels, like reading

Aldous Huxley and Erich Fromm, had opened a few doors, but I was essentially a product of industrial society; educated with the sort of blinders that every culture employs in order to perpetuate itself. My values, my understanding of history, my thought patterns all reflected the world view of homo industrialis.

Mainstream Western thinkers from Adam Smith to Freud and today's academics tend to universalize what is in fact Western or industrial experience. Explicitly or implicitly, they assume that the traits they describe are a manifestation of human nature, rather than a product of industrial culture. This tendency to generalize from Western experience becomes almost inevitable as Western culture reaches out from Europe and North America to influence all the earth's people.

Every society tends to place itself at the center of the universe and to view other cultures through its own colored lenses. What distinguishes Western culture is that it has grown so widespread and so powerful that it has lost a perspective on itself; there is no "other" with which to compare itself. It is assumed that everyone either is like us or wants to be.

Most Westerners have come to believe that ignorance, disease, and constant drudgery were the lot of preindustrial societies, and the poverty, disease, and starvation we see in the developing world might at first sight seem to substantiate this assumption. The fact is, however, that many, if not most of the problems in the "Third World" today are to a great extent the consequences of colonialism and misguided development.

Over the last decades, diverse cultures from Alaska to Australia have been overrun by the industrial monoculture. Today's conquistadors are "development," advertising, the media, and tourism. Across the world, "Dallas" beams into people's homes and pinstripe suits are de rigueur. This year I have seen almost identical toy shops appear in Ladakh and in a remote mountain village of Spain. They both sell the same blonde, blue-eyed Barbie dolls and Rambos with machine guns.

The spread of the industrial monoculture is a tragedy of many dimensions. With the destruction of each culture, we are erasing centuries of accumulated knowledge, and as diverse ethnic groups feel their identity threatened, conflict and social breakdown almost inevitably follow.

Increasingly, Western culture is coming to be seen as the normal way, the only way. And as more and more people around the world become competitive, greedy, and egotistical, these traits tend to be attributed to human nature. Despite persistent voices to the contrary, the dominant thinking in Western society has long assumed that we are indeed aggressive by nature, locked in a perpetual Darwinian struggle. The implications of this view for the way we structure our society are of fundamental importance. Our assumptions about human nature, whether we believe in inherent good or evil, underlie our political

ideologies and thus help to shape the institutions that govern our lives.

In our mainstream culture we blame innate human failings for our problems, while ignoring our own hand in the structural changes called “development” or “progress.” Technological development is seen as part of a continuum of evolutionary change. In the same way as human beings evolved over the millennia - starting to walk upright, to use language, to create artifacts - so, it is thought, they have invented the atom bomb and biotechnology. We do not distinguish between evolution and the changes wrought by the scientific revolution, forgetting that while Europe was transformed by industrialization, the majority of the world continued to live according to other principles and values. In so doing, we are effectively saying that Westerners are more highly evolved than traditional peoples.

We treat technological change as more natural than the changing weather, and seem locked into the belief that wherever scientific inventiveness goes, we must follow. This is not to deny that human nature has a dark side or that the process of development has brought benefits, but Ladakh has shown me that this process exacerbates greed, competition, and aggression while vastly increasing the potential for destruction. It was never previously possible to affect the climate, to poison the seas, or to eradicate forests, animal species, and cultures at the rate that we are doing today. The scale and the speed of our destructive power has never been so great. There is no historical precedent. Our situation is unique, and time is not on our side.

Large-scale environmental destruction, inflation, and unemployment are the consequences of a technoeconomic dynamic that has little to do with “right” or “left” politics. In a fundamental way, the world has experienced only one development model, based on one type of science and technology. The consequent specialization and centralization have led to a dramatic transformation of life that has outweighed and overshadowed the differences between capitalism and communism.

In Ladakh I have known a society in which there is neither waste nor pollution, a society in which crime is virtually nonexistent, communities are healthy and strong, and a teenage boy is never embarrassed to be gentle and affectionate with his mother or grandmother. As that society begins to break down under the pressures of modernization, the lessons are of relevance far beyond Ladakh itself.

It may seem absurd that a “primitive” culture on the Tibetan Plateau could have anything to teach our industrial society. Yet we need a baseline from which to better understand our own complex culture. In Ladakh I have seen progress divide people from the earth, from one another, and ultimately from themselves. I have seen happy people lose their serenity when they started living according to our norms. As a result, I have had to conclude that culture plays a far more fundamental role in shaping the individual than I had previously thought.

At the moment, an increasingly narrow view prevents us from seeing the roots of many of our problems; we cannot see the forest for the trees. Western culture depends on experts whose focus of attention grows more and more specialized and immediate at the expense of a broader, long-term perspective. Economic forces are pulling the world rapidly toward ever-greater specialization and centralization and an ever more capital - and energy-intensive pattern of life.

We urgently need to steer toward a sustainable balance - a balance between urban and rural, male and female, culture and nature. Ladakh can help to show the way, by giving us a deeper understanding of the interrelated forces that are shaping our society. This wider perspective is, I believe, an essential step in learning how to heal ourselves and the planet.

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