

Taker Guilt and the Exorcism of Anthropocene Angst

by JD Stillwater, Feb 2017

Many years ago I walked from Los Angeles to Washington DC with 400 of my closest friends. Well, they *became* some of my closest friends. Funny how hardship builds strong communities. There we are last summer, some of us anyway. We were walking for global nuclear disarmament, but as you know, that issue is tied to many others, like environmental stewardship, poverty, lots of things.

A friend of mine was hanging out with some... regular people the following year, admiring a beautiful sunset over Los Angeles. My friend pointed out that the sunset is beautiful because of smog; if not for *pollution*, those bright reds and oranges wouldn't be there. One of the regular folks turned to her and said "Wow. I'm glad I'm not an activist; you can never just appreciate something beautiful, because you have to focus on all the bad stuff that's happening so you can stop it." This is a sermon about that.

Speaking of smog, Joni Mitchell famously wrote:

Then can I walk beside you
I have come here to lose the smog
And I feel to be a cog in something turning
Hold that thought.

The Bad Stuff

When I say the words "jurassic, cretaceous, or pleistocene," you know I'm talking about geologic time - eras, periods or epochs of the earth's distant past. Here's the boring geologic chart from ninth grade. Here's a more colorful one I stole from the internet, and my favorite. (I got personal written permission from the artist on this one!)

Some geologists and environmentalists propose adding a new epoch, the Anthropocene, which literally means "time of man." They say that human impacts on the earth are so pervasive, so gargantuan, that millions of years from now it will be evident in the rock layers being laid down now. This idea is a bit controversial. You can't see the changes in the rock layers yet, because new layers mostly form where sediments drop out of slow water, like in shallow waters offshore. It's just hard to be sure. Changes we make to the climate may be detectable in the future, but probably won't last more than a few thousand years. A long time for us; nothing at all when it comes to layers of rock. A smear.

However. There will still be chemical traces of the nuclear weapons tests done in the 1950s. There will be plastic. Lots of plastic. We make 300 million metric tons of new

plastic every year. There is a slowly rotating current in the Pacific Ocean which is collecting small bits of plastic. It's called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch or sometimes the Pacific Trash Vortex. There will be asphalt. Just think about all the asphalt! Ocean acidification due to higher CO₂ levels may leave lasting impacts on limestone layers forming, since limestone dissolves in acid. There will also be a sudden drop in the diversity of fossils, a record of this sixth great extinction event we are causing. There will be strange local unconformities that record mines and mining operations. There will be massive landfills full of odd, non-geologic mixtures of stuff not found anywhere in nearby rock formations.

Thinking about all these impacts, some of them lasting millions of years, or in the case of extinctions *permanently*, makes me feel terrible. I know all this stuff is happening, and that it's happening because I'm driving a car, and using plastic, and buying stuff, so it's my fault, right? You feel that, too?

Sometimes I think it'd be better if we went back to the stone age. We could be the Noble Savages we like to tell stories about. But we can't. We are captives, as Daniel Quinn points out in the book *Ishmael*. We are captives of civilization. Humans are social creatures; few of us can thrive as stone-age hermits out in the woods somewhere, and even those who can no longer have any such woods to hide in. Civilization penetrates every dark glen on the planet sooner or later. Quinn calls us "Takers" in the book, as in "Civilization, take it or leave it." Except "leaving" is no longer an option. Civilization: our ancestors took it, so we are Takers, and that civilization is both our cage and the earth's destroyer.

So all this horrible stuff is being done on our behalf and there's not a whole lot we can do about it except feel guilty. It's a bit like being White in America. I feel guilty about the privileged position I hold in society, and I do the racial equivalents of recycling and conserving energy, but I can't change my race, and I can't opt out of civilization. I can't NOT be part of the problem, even as I strive to be part of the solution. When we're talking about race, there's a term for this: White Guilt. I suggest a new term: Taker Guilt, the guilt we feel about the environmental harm caused by our being "civilized" at this time in history.

But White guilt is hardly helpful, and neither is Taker guilt. White guilt incentivizes White people to put energy into proving their innocence and penitence when it could go towards working for true equality. Taker guilt lets us say "I'm still driving when I could bike, but it's OK because I *feel bad* about it. It pushes us to throw up our hands, to say "why should I dry my clothes on the line when energy companies release tons of methane into the sky every second?" Feeling awful is indulgent. It's as wasteful as that flared methane.

So what's the antidote? Well, just like White guilt, there's a flip side to Taker guilt.

The way out of white guilt is the concept of White privilege, the invitation to face facts, to acknowledge *without guilt or shame* that there is inherent unfairness built into the context of my life, unfairness that benefits me as a White man. To be *authentic* in acknowledging that and moving forward humbly, focusing on what's working, putting our energy into what's promising and good.

Similarly, if we are authentic about civilization and our role in it, if we face facts, maybe we'll be more effective in creating a sustainable future. Facts like: I am part of the universe, the planet, and the unfolding evolutionary process. So is everything else, no exceptions. I'm not a hostile visitor. I'm not a cancer on this planet, I *am* this planet, doing what this planet does. The cancer stems from seeing myself as separate, not from being present in the unfolding.

Look. When you see Hoover dam, you can see drowned canyons and blocked salmon, or you can see an amazing way water came to the Mohave Desert, an incredible feat of ingenuity by some clever and exceedingly cooperative primates. Both are true: there *are* harmful impacts from that dam, AND it's a very cool thing we made.

The Seattle skyline: do you think about crowding & rats and paradise paved, or a center of innovation, diversity, and human progress?

The Space Program: do you think "Yeah, now we're leaving our discarded trash on other planets, and launching our lethal weapons into a whole new frontier? Well, we are, it's true. *And* the space program brought us this [view of earth] world-changing spiritually-significant image of ourselves. And this one taken from near Jupiter [Pale Blue Dot]. And this one [XDF], which reaches 13 billion years into the past, and reveals the 400 billion galaxies in our family.

The antidote to Taker guilt is saying Yes to all of this. Acknowledge the downsides and the upsides, focusing on the big picture, the promise, the growing pains that tell us we're growing. Acknowledge but not obsess. Instead of "Yeah, but..." say "Yes, and..." We are good at this with babies. Babies are arguably just efficient machines for turning perfectly good food into so much poop.

Our daughter, for example, was born while we were moving from California to Ohio, so she was not yet a week old when we pulled into the post office in Effingham Illinois to buy some stamps. It was closing time, and while the worker sold us the last pack of stamps that day, Robin overflowed her diaper massively, spilling stinky liquid baby poop *all over* the floor of the post office lobby. It was a mess, I was a mess, and they were very gracious about it, especially considering it was closing time. In our embarrassment, we left without the stamps we had bought, and they

mailed them to us using the address on our check!

So do you think when I looked at Robin during her infancy, I focused my attention on her ability to squirt poop? No. I was focused on the promise of maturation, on her growing abilities to interact with the world around her, to make good choices for herself. But this global civilization, this global human society is not in infancy. Surveys conducted all over the world reveal that 2/3 of us perceive humanity as being in its adolescence. Civilization is a teenager.

Think about it:

- Teenagers are reckless and tend to live *without regard for the consequences of their behavior*.
- Teenagers are concerned with appearance and with fitting in, *with material things*.
- Teenagers prefer instant gratification.
- Teenagers tend to gather in groups or cliques, and often express “us versus them” and “in versus out” thinking and behavior.
- Teenagers’ brains are completely rewiring themselves, establishing new connections and new patterns of connections.
- Teenagers are rebellious and pretend at their independence from family

Humanity’s family of origin is the *family of life*. Nature. By adulthood, most kids understand that they are NOT independent, and come to value interdependence and connection.

Four times a year, on the solstices and equinoxes, British authorities allow the public to walk among the ancient standing stones of Stonehenge. The purpose is to allow modern druids and pagans to practice their ancient worship rites among the stones erected by the ancestors. Ann and I were fortunate enough to be there for a summer solstice a few years ago. We were awed by the stones, and disgusted by the behavior of many other people there. We left as the all-night party was winding up, but the ground was already dismayingly littered with discarded beer cans, paper trash, and careless refuse left by those who were there to worship intoxication and consumerism rather than ancestors rather than ancestors. In that place, that night, solemn spirituality and disgusting disregard had quite a fling together.

Teenagers, like our adolescent civilization, can exhibit a variety of maturity levels, sometimes on the same afternoon! But we mustn’t forget that our civilization is part of nature. We. Are. Nature. Humans are one expression of nature. Nature is Hermit crabs and Hyenas. Pigeons and Poison Ivy. Manatees and Mantids. Butterflies and Black holes. Cacti and Cancer. Planets and People. Like it or not, Nature includes Minerals and Mines, Oceans and Oil spills. We are an expression of nature. What we

do and make is part of nature.

It is a futile adolescent fantasy to think we are separate, whether you're arguing that we are noble achievers or cancerous destroyers. We are both and neither. We are nature, evolving. Just like an adolescent boy who is socially awkward and painfully codependent, yet plans to be a rock star. How do you raise a teenager? With active love - firm authentic unrelenting love.

Raise your hand if you've been in a relationship that lasted more than 7 yrs. It's hard, right? Relationships have upsides and downsides. What we pay attention to grows. So go ahead and obsess about the toilet seat, or the 50 pairs of shoes, or their driving, table manners, whatever. But if you want it to last, that is not sustainable.

I know because I've been there. Sometime around that seven-year mark, Ann and I needed help, so we found a great counselor who saved our marriage with a simple drawing. Well, "saved" the first time. But the other times are stories for another day. What she drew was this. [simple venn] She said "This is what we think a relationship is. This is the Hollywood romance, and the words we use invoke it. We say "She is my better half. He completes me. I gave her my heart. I'm lost without you." These two people are not whole people! If this is your relationship, one plus one makes about 1½! How could you NOT get on each others' nerves? And if they have to separate, one or the other is going to be left broken. Maybe both of them.

At this point you may be wondering "what does this have to do with Taker Guilt?" Trust me; we'll get there.

Our counselor drew more circles, this time like this [non-overlapping]. She said "Here are two whole, healthy people who enjoy one another's company. They decide to hang out and build something together. They build a relationship, one comprised of their shared experiences, and the little things they do for one another, and the investments they make in the relationship. The *relationship* is what connects them, not their neediness. If they separate, they will grieve the loss of the relationship, but they will be whole people moving on, not broken ones nursing wounds.

Active love requires that we feed that center circle. That's how mature people sustain a healthy relationship. They don't invest in the other person, they invest in the relationship, which then pays dividends to both parties. Active love. This doesn't just apply to romantic relationships. Try this on with your co-workers, your boss, your government. Feeding the center circle of my relationship with government asks me to vote, show up, call my reps, praise & protest, march and invest, but not get so enmeshed emotionally that I'm distressed if I don't get my way.

What about teenagers, though? The individual ones and the global ones? Active love asks us to feed that center circle. Call out the bad stuff, but don't get stuck obsessing about it. Give your kid a curfew, yes, but be willing to forgive and forget the fender-bender. Insist on no violence, but don't obsess about the haircut she gave herself, and definitely don't criticize the boyfriend! When it's your government, confront and protest, yes, but also admire sunsets and stars, pick up litter, enjoy a walk by the river, recycle, all that stuff you know to do, but mostly, love humanity in all its flaws, just like your misbehaving teenager.

This is Active Love. We are part of nature, a teenage part, acting the part. Since Nature is a harsh parent, we'll do better to parent ourselves, and parenting works better when we approach the kid with love rather than disgust.

Active Love breeds Active hope. In romance, a strong active center circle builds trust, and hope for long and healthy future together. In government, active citizens make for wiser decisions, and engender trust that government works in the best interests of those citizens. With teenagers, active love sets fair boundaries but also celebrates successes. A strong relationship, located outside of but shared between the parents and the teen, is a huge pile of goodwill that allows both to trust that teens eventually mature. Of course, parents still worry that their kid might die before that happens, and that's a real concern, but the hope comes in knowing that *if they don't die*, some progress toward maturity is inevitable. You just have to be patient while their brains turn to mush, knowing that this is part of the mysterious metamorphosis, a step in the rewiring necessary to form an adult mind.

Civilization is undergoing that same metamorphosis, and our collective mind is ... well, mush. Everywhere we look there is breakdown and chaos, but also evidence of rewiring, realignment, glimpses of maturity.

I feel myself a cog in something turning
Well maybe it is just the time of year
Or maybe it's the time of man
I don't know who I am
But life is for learning

Amazing how that song still resonates! Each of us is a cog in something turning, a single neuron in the brain of humanity, being reworked, rewired, reconnected as this unstable, adolescent, guilty civilization we make up matures into adulthood. Yes Joni, it IS just the time of man, we don't even know who we are as a species, but life is for learning.

Let us organize against air pollution, and enjoy the beauty of a sunset anyway. Let us chuckle at our adolescence and love people anyway. Let us acknowledge our crimes

and be proud of our achievements anyway. Let us feed the center circle and let all our partners be whole and different from us. Let us love actively, so that we can hope for a mature wholeness to come. Amen.

BENEDICTION: As we strive to be active lovers of life, may we remember that halting progress is still progress, in our relationships, our parenting, our nation, and in the whole world. Go in love and hope, and return in joy. Amen.