

What if Everyone Were Like Me?

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This week's commentary is a "What-if?" story. When such stories are about collective events from the past, they are called "Alternate History." What if Abraham Lincoln had not been assassinated in 1865? What if the Germans had defeated the Soviets at Stalingrad in 1942? What if 9-11 had been foiled before it happened? In general, such stories are often considered to be "Thought Experiments." Whatever we call them, these exercises are musings into the possibilities of how the world might have taken a different direction if at least one significant variable were changed. I don't spend a huge percentage of my time engaging in such imaginings, but I do visit that realm from time to time as a method of gaining different perspectives on the way life is. Over a lifetime of periodically telling myself such stories, I've discovered that imagining how reality might be different can produce some surprising revelations.

One of my favorite "what-ifs" is to wonder what human life on this planet might be like if everyone were similar to me. Not necessarily identical twins — a world comprised of perfect clones of me doesn't go very far as a compelling story. What I'm thinking here in the setup is more an imagining of everyone having DNA effectively identical to mine, and then wondering how that would play out over time.

An initial result of such a set-up is crudely shocking: Gee, I am neither a farmer nor a business person — I don't like getting my hands in the dirt, nor am I suited to any of the hierarchies of economics, neither board rooms nor factory floor. So, if everyone were like me, how would food get grown? How would any products get thought up, designed, and manufactured? My first overall reaction to imagining me as the model for humanity is that we'd probably still be living in caves. Or worse, that our species would have been so crippled by my limited proclivities that we'd have gone extinct long ago.

But then I reconsider. I've done more in my life than I realize. I did indeed work in a factory during my summers as a teen-ager. And I have grown house plants along the way. So maybe there's more to me than I realize or remember.

In addition, there's the factor of genetic mutation. If we started off with just my particular DNA, then each succeeding generation would see its share of permutations, most of which would be evolutionary dead ends, but with the occasional rare and brilliant innovation. Is it possible that my descendants might expand their possibilities over time? Well, yes.

In a weird way, that's how the world actually is. According to current science, every human being now drawing breath on the planet, as well as every person who has ever lived and died, was descended from a single pair of individuals. That thought alone is very provocative, and it's not even a fictional story. I mean, would the world we inhabit today be the same if two different individuals had been our progenitors, the original source of all the proclivities we embody?

As far as I know, the case can be argued in either direction. On the one hand, we can suggest that changing the base DNA code from millions of years ago could conceivably result in dramatic alteration of who we are and how we live now. On the other hand, the opposite argument is also compelling, that since DNA permutes and changes, all roads eventually lead to Rome. In that view, no matter where we start, we will eventually expand to manifest all possibilities for a given species.

Sometimes when I read books, I go right to the last chapter and read that first. Doing so changes my experience of reading the whole book. Allow me to do that here, to give you my feeling about the end of the story of what if everyone were like me. In this instance, I think working backwards is a more compelling way of getting to the most interesting revelations.

My basic assumption is this: If everyone in the world were like me, that world would not be any better than the one we have. When I really think about this particular what-if proposition and follow it to its most logical conclusion, I don't believe that life on earth would end up being improved or more loving and compassionate. I sure as hell don't believe that it would be more comfortable than the one we have now. The best case scenario is that the world would be somewhat altered — not better, just different. How much I'm not certain, but probably some. The worst-case scenario is that a world based on me alone might turn out to be really terrible, even more so than the world is now. I'm not sure of that, but I'm sufficiently aware of my own failings and fallibilities that a world based on me seems not a particularly smart or wise proposition.

I assume these relatively negative "results" not because I believe that I'm a bad or lousy person — no, I don't believe that for a second. Even on my worst days (and believe me, I have many of those), I remain aware of the positive side of my psyche. Like everyone I know, I have some good qualities and some not-so-wonderful ones. Overall, I feel that I've done all right throughout my 73 years, given where I started and then factoring in all the shit that's happened to me. Some of what's transpired in my life is clearly the direct or indirect result of my own choices and leanings. Other experiences grew out of what I chose, but with repercussions both happy and sad that I could never have imagined. Still other stuff came right out of left field, provoked by God knows what or whom (but not me), almost as a cosmic surprise. All in all, I'm pretty sure that I'm neither a saint nor a monster.

The upshot of all this is has little to do with my "what-if?" scenario. The implications, at least to my way of thinking, are more important when applied to the world as it exists now.

From as far back as I can remember — in my case, early childhood — I've been bothered by how screwed-up the world is and have wondered why it's that way. I'm thinking about the human world here, about society and modern civilization, not about the natural world of wild environments with its incredible diversity of life — both plant and animal. That world (the biosphere) has always struck me as amazing, far beyond our human ability to conceive or imagine. I consider the natural world neither "good" nor "bad," not "loving" nor "cruel," even though it obviously contains all of that when viewed through human eyes.

No, the world that gives me pause and concern is the one we humans have created — a world that is largely artificial and synthetic. Sure, it's made from the materials of the natural world, but it doesn't resemble mother nature's world at all, in part because we have created this world in such a manner as to divorce us from the natural. It's this human world that bothers me. Why are we so lousy at creating a world that doesn't add so egregiously to the pain and suffering that come with life in bodies? I mean, pain and suffering are an unavoidable part of material existence (for everyone, although more for some than others). And yet, human society has seemingly made the magnitude of suffering so much worse. Why can't we do better?

Look, I understand why we take steps to keep bugs out of our homes, why we go to great lengths to moderate the extremes of weather that nature produces, why we spend so much of our time pursuing greater comfort and convenience. All that is understandable to me. What is not so easy for me to comprehend is why we treat each other so terribly, why we mistreat and kill others — both humans and other creatures — without even a shred of remorse. In my perhaps simplistic philosophy, how we treat others will invariably boomerang back onto ourselves. Eventually we reap what we sow.

I think of how Nature has dealt with so many of the toxic elements that are fatal (or at least detrimental) to life. She distributed them within the earth's crust, essentially neutralizing their impact, so that life can flourish. And every other species seems to be just fine in allowing Nature to provide that help. All other creatures seem to understand that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. But humans? Oh no, with our big brains and penchant for tool-making, we just can't leave well enough alone. We are so bent on "improving" the world by re-combining the essential elements of life that we've aggressively dug up those toxins through mining, re-concentrated them to maximum toxicity, then mixed those deadly poisons with other more neutral elements through the syntheses of metallurgy and chemistry, all to make products that we think will improve productivity and make life better, but which actually result in poisoning ourselves.

Modern agri-business is a case in point. Over just the last century, we have developed and used herbicides and pesticides to improve the productivity of farming. When salesman in the 1940s wanted to convince skeptical farmers that DDT was "harmless," they ate handfuls of the stuff. "See," they told the farmers, "I'm fine. This stuff isn't dangerous..." Well, that was a bald-faced lie. So, we

eventually wised up and banned DDT. But in 1974, Monsanto created Roundup herbicide (glyphosate), which is deadly not only to certain plants, but humans as well. Monsanto marketed the hell out of Roundup, whose use has been widespread throughout agri-business farming. And the result? That poison is now found in at least 80% of Americans' bodies.

It's one thing to use chemicals we don't know are harmful. Along with DDT, dioxin is another example of a chemical that was banned when we finally discovered how toxic it was. But to continue synthesizing new poisons for use in products that are aggressively marketed for sale even after knowing of their negative impacts is madness. Time and again, when faced with the choice between money and every other value, far too many of the elite few who make most of the critical decisions choose money.

The problem here isn't just products, though. It's not just the cigarette industry or agri-business or nuclear power or even the weapons manufacturers. Beyond products, our attitudes toward other life, both human and non-human, are too often reprehensible. I understand and accept that loyalty, generosity, and compassion tend to operate based on convenience — proximity, similarity, familiarity, and personal love. But so often we care only for our own tribe while saying "Fuck you" to everyone and everything else. We sure as hell can't be accused of spreading our love too thin. And in end, that withholding of love and concern means killing the world and ourselves with it.

Whatever the reasons may be for the human world's apparently terminal troubles — our cruelty, our disregard, our tendency to mistake the profane for the sacred — I'm pretty sure that the cause isn't that everyone is not like me. If everyone were like me, I fear that we would still find ourselves in a similar predicament to what we face now.

Despite all our considerable knowledge, it doesn't appear that we're close to the kind of wisdom that will allow our species to grow up. And yes, I realize that this may be asking and expecting far too much from us. We are, after all, a species of great talents and terrible liabilities. I'm disappointed, however, that we don't seem willing to even try to grow up. Rather than seeking ways to change our programming, we kick the can down the road with fake solutions that perpetuate our condition of disturbed and dysfunctional adolescence.

It's a shame we can't do better than that, but doing better is apparently beyond our collective capabilities. Might we yet awaken from our faulty hard-wiring and hypnotized trances in time to change course and pull back from disaster? I'd like to think so, but it seems much more likely that we'll have to go through the terrible meltdown of collapse and then — maybe, if we're real lucky — pick up the pieces and start over. In any case, I probably won't be around to see how things play out. That burden will fall to the young ones.