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News that Inspires

How to Think Like an Ecosystem
by Frances Moore Lappe

Gradually it's dawned on me: We humans are creatures of the mind. We perceive the world according to our core, often unacknowledged, assumptions. They determine, literally, what we can see and what we cannot. Nothing so wrong with that, perhaps—except that, in this crucial do-or-die moment, we're stuck with a mental map that is life-destroying.

And the premise of this map is lack—not enough of anything, from energy to food to parking spots; not enough goods and not enough goodness. In such a world, we come to believe, it's compete or die. The popular British writer Philip Pullman says, "we evolved to suit a way of life which is acquisitive, territorial, and combative" and that "we have to overcome millions of years of evolution" to make the changes we need to avoid global catastrophe.

If I believed that, I'd feel utterly hopeless. How can we align with the needs of the natural world if we first have to change basic human nature?

An eco-mind thinks …

Less about quantities and more about qualities.

Less about fixed things and more about the ever-changing relationships that form them.

Less about limits and more about alignment.

Less about what and more about why.

Less about loss and more about possibility.

Fortunately, we don't have to. A new way of seeing that is opening up to us can form a more life-serving mental map. I call it "eco-mind"—looking at the world through the lens of ecology. This worldview recognizes that we, no less than any other organism, live in relation to everything else. As the visionary German physicist Hans-Peter Dürr puts it, "There are no parts, only participants."

As part of this shift, breakthroughs in a range of disciplines are confirming what we already know about ourselves, if we stop and think about it: That humans are complex creatures and what we do—from raising children to caring for elders to sharing with our neighbors—exhibits at least as much natural tendency to cooperate as to compete.

The view that our species is basically brutal defies the evidence: "There is a very tiny

handful of incidences of conflict and possible warfare before 10,000 years ago," says archaeologist Jonathan Haas of the Field Museum in Chicago, "and those are very much the exception." Our species has a vastly longer experience evolving in close-knit communities, knowing our lives depended on one another. The result is at least six inherent traits we can foster, once we learn to navigate the world with the map of eco-mind.

1. Cooperation

It turns out that cooperating and co-creating explain our evolutionary success just as much as competition does. No wonder neuroscientists using fMRI scans discovered that when human beings cooperate, our brains' pleasure centers are as stimulated as when we eat chocolate!

And what were the -evolutionary pressures that turned us into cooper-ators?

Human beings are creatures of meaning, seeking ways to give our days value beyond ensuring our own survival.

In her 2009 book Mothers and -Others, University of California, Davis, anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy challenged the accepted belief that our penchant for cooperation emerged through bonding to fight our neighbors. No, she says. Over most of the 200,000 years we've been around, there were simply too few of us to warrant fighting over territory. Instead, our capacity for cooperation evolved in response to our unique breeding culture.

While other primates generally don't trust others to care for their infants, humans have long turned to aunties, grandmas, and friends to help care for their babies from birth. With these "helpers," children have the "luxury of growing up slowly, building stronger bodies, better immune systems, and in some cases bigger brains," Hrdy surmises.

It is this capacity for cooperation, honed through shared child rearing, that most distinguishes Homo sapiens, claims Hrdy.

2. Empathy

Cooperation is made possible by empathy, and it, too, seems to be a capacity deeply carved into us. We see a hint of early empathy in the finding that babies cry at the sound of other babies crying but rarely at a recording of their own cries.

In the 1990s, Italian scientists first discovered what many now see as a cellular foundation of empathy: "mirror neurons" in our brains. When we are only observing another's actions, it turns out, these neurons fire as if we were actually performing the observed actions ourselves. Evidence grows that mirror neurons respond to emotional states as well as actions.

A study in Science in 2008 reported that we actually get greater pleasure from giving than receiving. Given what we are learning about our cooperative, empathetic capacities, it should be no surprise that psychologists estimate that, on average, more than 80 percent of happiness comes from relationships, health, spiritual life, friends, and work fulfillment. Only 7 percent is about money.

3. Fairness

Fairness lives within most of us, for we learned long ago that injustice destroys community—the bonds of trust on which our individual survival depends.

Plus, fairness seems to make us feel good, even when at our own expense, Nature reported in 2010. In a simple experiment, pairs of young men were given $30 apiece, while one in each pair got a $50 bonus. The brain's reward center responded in those who got the bonus. No surprise. The surprise came when those lucky men were asked to imagine how they would feel if they got another bonus, or if the next bonus went to their partners. The second scenario, the one reducing inequality, was the one that lit up the brain's pleasure center.

4. Efficacy

Could our species have made it this far if we were essentially couch potatoes, shoppers, and whiners? I don't think so. We are doers. Our need to "make a dent" in the wider world is so great, argued social philosopher Erich Fromm, that we should toss out René Descartes' theorem, "I think, therefore I am," and replace it with: "I am, because I effect."

The trait seems to show up even in tiny babies. Three-month-olds respond with pleasure to a moving mobile. But a study shows that they "prefer to look at [a] … mobile they can influence themselves," writes Professor Alison Gopnik in The Philosophical Baby. Plus, "they smile and coo at it more too." For Gopnik, the finding suggests that even the youngest among us enjoy making things happen and seeing the consequences.

In a widely known experiment carried out in the 1970s, Harvard psychologists Ellen Langer and Judith Rodin divided nursing home residents into two groups. In one, residents had choices as to where to receive visitors and when to watch movies; they were also given houseplants to care for. Residents in the second group did not have these choices.

After a year and a half, the Harvard investigators found that fewer than half as many residents in the more engaged group had died. Langer attributes the stunning difference to the enhanced "mindfulness" of those making more choices. I see the outcome -differently. For me, the longer lives of those responsible for themselves and their plants affirm that we thrive when we feel we have power.

5. Meaning

Human beings are creatures of meaning, seeking ways to give our days value beyond ensuring our own survival. The prominence of religion certainly attests to this need. But even the private act of voting may express this need, it dawned on me recently. Rationally, I can easily see that my single vote isn't likely to decide anything. But entering the voting booth, I feel a quiet sense of pride welling up because I know I'm playing my part in a larger human drama—protecting a democratic ideal by my act.

6. Imagination, Creativity, and Attraction to Change

In The Philosophical Baby, Gopnik writes: "More than any other creature, human beings are able to change. … What neuroscientists call plasticity—the ability to change in light of experience—is the key to human nature at every level from brains to minds to societies." The great evolutionary advantage of human beings is our ability to escape the constraints of instinct, Gopnik reminds us.

Both “using tools and making plans … depend on anticipating future possibilities,” and we can see these “abilities emerging even in babies who can’t talk yet.”
Human beings’ unique capacity for imagination ends this list because—coupled with our plasticity—it is what enables us to envision and make the changes we must in order to draw forth the other five essential qualities. And it is this imaginative self that takes pleasure in the challenge.

But if we’re so great . . .

If humans are all the above, then why in the world do we mindlessly participate every day in a social ecology that generates so much destruction and misery for so many?

For me, answering that question starts with acknowledging that the six magnificent traits above are only part of being human. But history, as well as laboratory experiments in which we are the guinea pigs, reveals that most of us have every bit as much ability to be competitive, selfish, and even horribly cruel.

So, given those potentials, why are we choosing the traits that are getting us, and the rest of life on the planet, in such trouble? And what will it take to bring out those six strong traits and use them to change where we’re headed?

Here’s where the eco-mind comes to the rescue.

Seeing with an eco-mind means fully appreciating the power of context—including conditions we ourselves create—to determine the qualities we express. So the question for humanity seems relatively straightforward:

Which social rules and norms have proven to bring out the worst in humans, and which bring forth the best while protecting us from the worst?

Here’s my take. At least three conditions have been shown over our long history to elicit the worst in us:

1. Extreme power inequalities. From historical oppression to today’s unprecedented economic disparity.

2. Secrecy, which allows us to evade accountability—as occurred when the financial industry, operating without transparency and public oversight, brought the global economy to its knees.

3. Scapegoating, where we create “the other” to blame, whether it’s kids crying “he did it” on a playground or citizens at a town meeting shouting down a congressperson.

We need to reverse those three dangerous trends and, instead, disperse power, enhance transparency, and foster mutual accountability.

All three negatives seem to arise with ferocity in cultures premised on lack, where continuous rivalry is presumed. Sadly, each has been on the rise in the United States for at least three decades. And within our culture's mental map, it all feels inevitable. Our empathy and enjoyment in cooperation, our deep sensitivity to fairness, and our need for meaning, efficacy, and creativity—all are stifled in societies where power is tightly held and opportunities shut off for so many.

For me, it's no surprise, then, that scholars uncover a "strong relationship" between the extent of economic inequality and mental illness across countries. This mismatch between the things we know bring out the best in us and the cultures we live in helps me understand why depression has become a global pandemic.

With an eco-mind we stay focused on the social ecology we ourselves are creating that denies us the best in our species' own nature. Knowing all this about ourselves, our challenge seems clear: We need to reverse those three dangerous trends and, instead, disperse power, enhance transparency, and foster mutual accountability. In the process, we will create a culture of alignment with nature in which human needs are met in ways that dissolve the presumption of lack.

The key is what I call "Living Democracy," which consists not only of accountable forms of governance but also of a daily practice: a set of values—among them inclusion, fairness, and mutual accountability—that infuse everything we do in daily life. It is living what Oxford physiologist Denis Noble observes about biological systems in his book The Music of Life: "There are not privileged components telling the rest what to do. There is rather a form of democracy [involving] every element at all levels." The interaction of those components, Noble says, creates the shape of life.

Rising Sea Levels:
The View from a Canoe
Decades ago, the legendary journey of the open-ocean canoe Hokule'a revealed secrets of Hawai'i's past and sparked pride in native culture. Now, a voyage around the world offers a new generation lessons about Earth's uncertain future.

With this understanding, opportunities to be effective appear everywhere: We can build citizen movements, replacing "privately held government" with elections and governance accountable to citizens. And we can rebuild our own mental maps by doing the hard work of actively nurturing our own positive proclivities rather than taking them for granted. Just one specific example: When students at the University of California, Santa Cruz, decided to launch a student-organized sustainability course, collaborating with the administration in order to green their campus, they realized their success would depend in large measure on how well they practiced what I call the "arts of democracy"—such people skills as active listening, mediation, negotiation, and creative conflict. They got training, stuck with it, and their course has spread to other University of California campuses, touching the lives of thousands.

With an eco-mind, we know that if we're all connected, we're all implicated. We look bravely at our nature and realize we don't have to cajole others to be "better." Whew.

Instead, we can get on with creating social rules and norms proven to elicit the best in us—which is plenty. We then have a chance of making this century's planetary turnaround an epic struggle for life so vivid and compelling that it satisfies our deep needs for

connection, fairness, and meaning.