

The New and Ancient Story of Interbeing by Charles Eisenstein

Why does the sun shine? A random result of coalescing gases igniting nuclear fusion? Or is it in order to give its light and warmth to Life? Why does the rain fall? Is it the senseless product of blind chemical processes of evaporation and condensation? Or is it to water life? Why do you seek to pour forth your song? Is it to show off your genetic fitness to attract a mate, or is it to contribute to a more beautiful world? We may fear those first answers but it is the second that carries the ring of truth.

Every culture, as far as I know, has something that I call a Story of the World. That story is a weave of myths, meanings, narratives, words, symbols, rituals, and agreements that together define the world. That story tells us who we are, how to be a man or a woman, what is important and valuable, what is real, what is sacred, what humanity's role and purpose is on earth.

The world's dominant culture, the one called modern, has a story of the world too. I call it the story of separation. It is the story that holds us as separate individuals and holds humanity separate from nature. Here, giving does not come naturally. In fact, that story says our default nature is selfishness, down to the genetic level. If I'm separate from you, then more for me is less for you.

In the Story of Separation, trust does not come naturally either. The world is our adversary, full of other competing separate individuals, human and otherwise, whom we must overcome to have a good life -weeds, germs, the Russians, whatever. Beyond that, the forces of nature are adversaries too, because they are utterly random, and the whole universe tends toward entropy. There is no intelligence or purpose outside of ourselves. Therefore, to establish a comfortable human habitation in the world, we must dominate and control these forces, insulate ourselves from them, and harness them to our purposes. That's what the Story of Separation says.

Where in that story is there room for gratitude? Where is there room for gift? In the Story of Separation you basically have to rise above human nature, rise above the way of the world, to be selfless, generous, or altruistic. Becoming a good person, then, involves a sort of conquest, a conquest of self. It is the same domination of nature, this time turned inward.

Now I have to say, this story is quickly becoming obsolete. Even its scientific dimension in genetics, physics, and biology are crumbling. In complexity theory, we understand that order can emerge spontaneously out of chaos, without an external organizing force. In ecology, we understand that the wellbeing of one is inseparable from the wellbeing of all. So let me talk about gift, generosity, and gratitude from the perspective of another story, a new and ancient story I like to call Interbeing.

In the story of Interbeing, life is a gift. The world and everything in it is a gift. We did not earn our lives. We did not earn the sun; it is not thanks to our hard efforts that it shines. We did not earn the ability of plants to grow. We did not earn water. We did not earn our conception nor our breath. Our hearts beat and our livers metabolize all on their own. Life is a gift.