

On the Humanity of Humans

Living here in Africa, thousands of kilometres from the terrible events that occurred on September 11th and the following continued acts of terrorism, I now truly realize just how small the Planet has become. As the horrendous events in Washington, New York and Pennsylvania occurred, I along with thousands of people in South Africa and millions around the world, watched with horror what surely must be acts that will alter the very course of human history. As we watched the images live on television, I heard people comment on the inhumanity of the actions, yet how they were so typical of human beings, and it is these comments, and others in a similar vein that I have heard echoed countless times since by reporters and commentators that has prompted me to explore the humanity of humans.

For almost five decades studies of chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans have led to the realization that most of what we see in humans as “uniquely human” is shared by our closest relatives. They love, hate, murder and even wage war. Chimpanzees use tools, and over 39 distinct tool and cultural patterns among *Pan* groups have been recognized throughout central and West Africa. We now more clearly understand that many of the things we see as bad traits are really just long standing *hominoid* characters that we have inherited from a common ancestor some 6 – 7 million years ago. But I would like to state something that may seem at first contradictory. These most recent actions by terrorists are *not* typical of humans. They are not just inhuman acts but fly in the face of some six million years of our evolutionary history. As the reader may be aware, it was once thought that our human origins had been bathed in the blood of our own species, that we originated as a killer ape that held no sanctity of life for our own or others. Raymond Dart, a scientist who founded African paleoanthropology here at the University of the Witwatersrand, was one of the most ardent supporters of this “killer-ape” hypothesis. Scarred from his experiences in World War I he developed, between the 1920’s and 1940’s, what became known as the *Osteo, Donto, Keratic* culture of early humans, *Osteo* for bone, *Donto* for tooth and *Keratic* for horn. These three terms referred to the bones Dart had found at the Makapansgat limeworks in the then Northern Transvaal and he postulated that the origins of humanity had been bathed in the blood of vicious, killer ape-men using bones, teeth and horns to savage prey, and each other. This theory of a blood thirsty, murderous origin of our species inspired such imagery as the opening scene of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* where the ape-men use bones to bludgeon their enemies. But the work of anthropologists, paleoanthropologists and primatologists through the years has shown that for humans this story of our origin is simply not true. Darts theory was overturned by the work of Bob Brain, who showed that the bones of Makapansgat were just the remains of carnivore feeding. If anything, we now know that humans are the most peaceful of all primates, maybe the most peaceful of all mammals. I can almost hear many of you saying “but wait a second, what about the wars, what about genocide, what about September 11th?” Yet you can see this fact in the evolutionary design of our bodies themselves. In even the very earliest fossil human ancestors found, dating back to 6 million years, we see dramatic physical changes indicating an alteration in behaviour towards cooperation. This is seen in such areas as the reduction of canines, showing that there was a clear need to change the way we interacted with other members of our own species. The large canine teeth of all other primates are not solely defensive tools against predators, but are in fact used for the most part in displays and fighting with other members of their

own species. As an example, the African savannah baboon *Papio cynocephalus* has larger relative canines to its body size than a lion. No other ape, and indeed no other primate, has reduced their canines to the degree seen in even our earliest ancestors. This simple morphological shift in our lineage is a critical change that indicates one of the primacies of our character: support for and peaceful interaction with members of our own species. There are many other inherited physical characters like this in our family tree: a low degree of sexual dimorphism, our facial architecture and musculature designed to smile, the list can go on and on. We who study the origin of our species can see human cooperation as a driving force in our evolutionary success. The need to cooperate and work together to survive the changes in Africa between 3 and 2 million years ago that resulted in the origin of our genus *Homo*, was fundamental to our survival. To live as a rather defenceless ape in this harsh, changing African environment without sharp claws or teeth required us to change normal primate behaviour. In order to maintain cultures and languages over millennia required our ancestors to move away from the behaviour typical of other animals and greet other members of our species with support and goodwill, not violence and dominance. To share as a community in the raising of our long-dependant children, teaching them through human language, and by example, what we humans feel is right from wrong. A mere hundred and fifty thousand years ago we arose as modern humans in Africa, not with dramatic physical changes making us stronger and tougher, but in fact our arrival was signalled by a reduction in size, the appearance of more childlike features than those of our ancestors and, in our cultures, an awareness of mortality and human compassion, signalled in acts such as burial of the dead and the origin of art. Acts such as those that have occurred on September 11th are not just inhuman acts, they fly in the face of everything that has made us as a species a success. They violate our very makeup, our morphology and the fundamentals of human behaviour that have allowed our species to spread throughout the world.

For those readers who are right now thinking of all the examples where humans have dealt mass destruction their fellows, and I would point out that these will almost certainly be recent examples from the last few thousand years, I would like you to ponder this. Can you name another primate, and possibly even any other mammal, where you could take males and females from different populations or different geographical regions that have never met and put them in the same room together and lock the door and anticipate that when you opened the door they would all be sitting peacefully together? One can certainly undertake this experiment with humans, we do it every day. I wouldn't recommend trying it with any other mammal.

It is at times like these that it is more critical than ever that human society, with its humanness continues. To unite the world in the knowledge that we are not what a few, inhuman individuals wish to make us believe: creatures of violence and hatred. We are in fact a remarkable, wonderful, caring, cooperative primate. An animal that has become so successful because we simply do not behave in this way. It has only been in the last sixty years or so of human history that an aberrant few can take tools of our own making and wreak such havoc on so many. But the majority of humans must be made aware that these people are the exception and not the norm. It is why we as humans are so horrified by the acts. This is not what six million years of human evolution has been about.

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