

The World Without Us
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Readings

1. Excerpts from [*The World Without Us*](#) (pgs. 87, 5) by Alan Weisman, a book which “pictures a world from which we [humans] all suddenly vanished.” What would be the effects on the natural world?:

If the dominant ungulates of the savanna—cattle—disappear, wildebeest will expand to take their place. If humans vanish, will baboons move into ours? Has their cranial capacity lay suppressed...because we got the jump on them, being first out of the trees? With us no longer in their way, will their normal potential surge to the occasion and push them into a sudden, punctuated evolutionary scramble into every cranny of our vacant niche?

...If human crops revert to a mosaic of woods and grassland, and if baboons fill our keystone slot, would they be satisfied to dwell in pure natural beauty?

Or would curiosity and sheer narcissistic delight in their unfolding powers eventually push them and their planet to the brink, too?...

[T]here are still a few Earthly spots where all our senses can inhale a living memory of this Eden before we were here. Inevitably they invite us to wonder how nature might flourish if granted the chance.

Since we’re imagining, why not also dream of a way for nature to prosper that doesn’t depend on our demise? We are, after all, mammals ourselves. Every life-form adds to this vast pageant. With our passing, might some lost contribution of ours leave the planet a bit more impoverished?

Is it possible that, instead of heaving a huge biological sigh of relief, the world without us would miss us?

2. Excerpt from [*a letter by novelist Wallace Stegner to the Wildland Research Center at the University of California, Dec. 3, 1960:*](#)

There is so much that wilderness can do for us. That is the reason we need to put into effect, for its preservation, some other principle than the principles of exploitation or “usefulness” or even recreation. We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.

Sermon

There is an ancient tale told of a man named Job, a wealthy yet righteous man, whose life is suddenly shattered by a series of disasters, ever-increasing in tragedy. Job cries out to God for an answer, a reason for all he has suffered, and when God finally answers, he does so in a puzzling, troubling way, the beginning of which you heard in our Opening Words:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding...On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

Rather than answering Job's plea for justice, God seems only to be throwing back questions of his own.

What kind of God is this? All these blustery questions from an apparently irritable Deity don't add up to an answer...or do they?

If God really just wanted to assert his power and shut Job up, it seems that he could have done so in one supremely terrifying sentence, one divine declaration of displeasure, but his response goes on for some 130 verses. So what do these verses contain?

He describes the rhythms and beauties of the natural world; he describes the activities and proclivities of wild creatures; and though he's responding to Job, our representative human, he mentions humans only to note their absence:

Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain and a way for the thunderbolt to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life, to make the ground put forth grass?

Or to highlight humans' inability to understand:

Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? (38:16, 18) A rhetorical question: the answer being "NO!"

Or to emphasize humans' lack of control:

Who has let the wild ass go free?...It scorns the tumult of the city: it does not hear the shouts of the driver. Is the wild ox willing to serve you? Will it spend the night at your crib? (39:5, 7, 9)

Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high? (39:26-27)

This is a singular passage--sandwiched in the middle of Hebrew and Christian scriptures that are *all about humans*--in that it doesn't talk about the relationship between God *and humans at all*. And yet, it is said to be God's words in response to a human cry. And if we accept that the writer of Job wrote this as a true response, then the message from God to human is clear: *It's not all about you*.

God in this tale is painting a picture for Job--for we humans--of *a world without us*.

Now granted, this may not strike you as a fitting answer to Job, either. There is nothing that justifies the suffering that Job had to experience, and that so many people experience every day on this earth. We have a responsibility to face that suffering head-on and to do our best as fellow creatures to try and alleviate it as best we can.

God offers no tidy explanation of suffering in Job...but he does place it *in context*. *It*--this grand expanse of existence; this panorama of life--*it* is not all about *us*. If we are to address suffering, we can

do it most effectively from the awareness that the world, the universe, the cosmos does not revolve around us.

And it may be said this is something we already know.

People have known for hundreds of years that it is *the earth* that revolves around *the sun*, not the other way around, right? Well, *some* people...A [2005 New York Times article](#) reports that one in five adult Americans think that *the sun* revolves around *the earth*.

And if one in five of us have not learned the fact that we are not the center of the universe, a far greater number have neglected to integrate its ramifications even if we have come to accept the science. Religion, generally speaking, stubbornly sticks to a notion that somehow, when all is said and done, humans are the reason for everything. All that went before us was simply prelude and everything that comes after us will be inconsequential as we will have either checked out of this motel in favor of eternal, ethereal digs in heaven, or God will make *a new earth* that we can escape to, avoiding the responsibility for the devastation we have inflicted on *the old earth*.

The exhibit in the Creationist Museum of humans and dinosaurs hanging out together is but one example of the human tendency to believe that *it is all about us and it has always been all about us*. The trouble that fundamentalist Christians have with the theory of evolution is *not so much* that it displaces God, but that it *displaces humans* from their exalted status as the proverbial apples of God's eye. And this human hubris is as likely to show up in secular circles as in religious ones; it is sewn into the fabric of our societies, of our economies, of our ideologies. No matter how many times we are faced with the infinitesimally small segment we inhabit on the timeline of life on Earth, we find it hard to imagine that the meaning of life, the universe, and everything does not begin and end with humans; we find it hard to imagine the natural world as being anything but scenery for the great drama of human purpose; we find it hard to imagine *a world without us*.

But the writer of Job did just that. And so does Alan Weisman in the book entitled, *The World Without Us*. While the writer of Job carries us to the distant past of the dawn of creation, Weisman imagines a human-free future. What would happen if we all just disappeared...tomorrow?

Look around you, he writes, at today's world. Your house, your city. The surrounding land, the pavement underneath, and the soil hidden below that. Leave it all in place, but extract the human beings. Wipe us out and see what's left. How would the rest of nature respond if it were suddenly relieved of the relentless pressures we heap on it and our fellow organisms? How soon would, or could, the climate return to where it was before we fired up all our engines? (pg. 4)

As we prepare for the International Day of Climate Action on Saturday, calling on the world to reduce to 350 parts per million CO₂ levels in the atmosphere, a teacher of marine chemistry and atmospheric physics at New York University speculates in *A World Without Us* that, while it may only take a mere 1,000 years for the ocean to absorb 90% of the excess CO₂ that humans have created, it would take about 100,000 years for the geologic cycle to return CO₂ all the way to prehuman levels (pg. 41).

And while CO₂ feels intangible, what about all our garbage? While there is much talk of *landfills*, Weisman discovers that much of what is tossed ends up in the ocean. During a 1,000 mile crossing of what is called the North Pacific Gyre, an oceanic whirlpool of sorts affectionately called by oceanographers the Great Pacific Garbage Patch because of the trash that collects there, Captain Moore

of the Aligta Marine Research Foundation calculated half a pound for every 100 square meters of debris on the surface, and arrived at 3 million tons of plastic. His estimate was corroborated by U.S. Navy calculations. Returning later with a trawling device, the group found even more plastic: by weight, six times more plastic than plankton on the ocean's surface (121).

Since no plastic has yet died a natural death, it's hard to tell how long these would stick around once we're gone. "Give it 100,000 years," says a senior research scientist at North Carolina's Research Triangle and the author of *Plastics and the Environment*, "I'm sure you'll find many species of microbes whose genes will let them do this tremendously advantageous thing...It's just a matter of waiting for evolution to catch up with the materials we are making" (127-128).

While the things we've grown will perish and our farms will quickly be overrun with wildlife and forests, the things we've put in the soil will last all too long. Zinc lasts about 3,700 years; cadmium 7,500 years; lead 35,000 years. (To put it in context, that would put us a couple ice ages back.) And chromium apparently the most stubborn of all: 70,000 years (158).

Weisman imagines that water, diverted by human populations, will soon flow again in desert cities like Phoenix (pg. 19). Moisture will unbuild our homes, as water creeps under roofing and seeps into seams, flows from burst pipes when the temperature drops below freezing, rusts nails and screws and rots wood (pg. 15-17). In New York City, the subways will flood once the 753 pumps that keep the tunnels dry quit running (pg.25).

Most all of the things we cherish--our artwork, our literature, our architecture, our ideas--would perish with us, while so much of what we hide from ourselves—our garbage, our chemicals, the plants and animals that we blithely carry from one environment to another—would last...but *life* would go on.

Wild animals and plants will take over for their domestic counterparts. Though our nuclear plants would melt into blobs, releasing poisonous radiation, species would suffer through and adapt, just as Weisman reports that birds and moose and lynx and wolves have returned to the Chernobyl site in Russia. Life would go on.

And if humans disappeared, might some creature like the baboon take our spot? And if so, what then?

It is an extremely interesting journey that Weisman takes us on, and I also found the book to be greatly moving and oddly hopeful.

It is depressing, yes, to find that our most destructive creations may turn out to be our most lasting legacies. It is eye-opening to discover the constant maintenance that our technological and architectural creations require. It is heartening to note that life on earth, however challenged by human arrogance and stupidity, has ingenious ways of adapting and continuing on in one form or another. But I also found it truly inspiring to think that, if we can fully grasp our position as, not the center of all things, but newly-arrived, grateful participants in this hugely mysterious and unlikely pageant of life itself—if we can fully integrate the precariousness of our existence as a species—the joy we feel as creatures may transform our relationship with the earth. Once we humans are relieved of the burden of carrying THE PURPOSE OF ALL THINGS, we can gladly take on the task of living wisely so that we may pass along to our children's children's children's children the awesome—but by no means guaranteed—gift of living on this planet.

Think about it: isn't this one of the primary things we strive to teach our kids? That they are *not* the center of the universe? Isn't this one of the most important signs of maturity? Isn't it true that we know, deeply, that they—and we, and everyone—that we will only understand and be able to embrace our own true value when we truly value others, when we see our lives *in context*? If this is true for individuals, why should it be different for humanity itself?

It's not all about us! But it *includes* us, at least for now. How can we cherish this chance that we have. How can we preserve the beauty of what is...not based on "principles of exploitation or 'usefulness' or even recreation," but to "reassure ourselves of our sanity as creatures." If we can humbly, reverently take our place embrace our place in the interdependent web of which we are a part—only a part—how might we respond to the challenges we face? Can we picture that?

Our ability to imagine just may be one of our greatest attributes as a species.

[Mary Oliver writes,](#)

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting--
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

Since we're imagining, writes Alan Weisman, *why not also dream of a way for nature to prosper that doesn't depend on our demise? We are, after all, mammals ourselves. Every life-form adds to this vast pageant.*

Why not also imagine a world *with* us?

Just imagine...

Closing Words

May we dare to imagine a world *without* us
So that we can more thoughtfully plan a world *with* us.
May our maps of the road ahead
Chart courses toward a geography of hope.
May we humbly find our place in the family of things,
And meet each new day, grateful to be included.