

Shame

Karim Benammar

Human beings are locusts: they devour everything, leaving a wasteland behind. Collectively, we pillage the Earth's resources, destroy habitats and endanger other species. We have succeeded in polluting the atmosphere to the point of changing global weather. Our numbers grow so rapidly that we are threatening to undo our own civilization. We are like a virus which sickens its host until it dies, taking its parasite with it.

This is a familiar refrain, a tirade which we encounter every day in the press, on the news and in elaborate treatises. It is the well-meaning and urgent message of those who speak to us of inconvenient truths, who presage collapse, who paint frightening fantasies of a world without us, of a scorched planet where traumatized survivors fight it out for brute survival. Doomsday fantasies – and today it is an ecological Armageddon - are a favourite domain of Hollywood and its special effects departments, and thus of our collective imagination.

When we consider this, a natural reaction is shame. We feel responsible for our actions, for destroying Mother Nature, for our stupidity and for our carelessness. We have been bad and we should be ashamed of ourselves. We are ashamed of what we have done, what we continue to do, and what we fail to do. We are ashamed of our history and of what our future may bring.

Shame is familiar, even comfortable. The feeling of shame is deeply rooted in our tradition. Our Christian culture teaches us to be meek, to be aware of our shortcomings and our sins. We must be humble and know our place. Not so long ago we were ashamed of our body, of its nakedness, of its functions and of its desires. Many of us have liberated ourselves from this shame, and become quite shameless in our enjoyment. We cannot imagine this kind of shame anymore, but the lure of shame is attractive. Our new prophets warn us about ecological destruction and our pivotal role in it, and we are happy to wallow in shame again.

The opposite of shame is pride, one of the seven deadly sins. We are cautioned against pride, warned that pride comes before the fall and that pride blinds us. Where is the easy pride and confidence of the Enlightenment, when reason was to carry human beings into a brighter future? What of all the dreams of a better tomorrow, for the blossoming of our humanity? Is our very progress not now leading to our undoing? Is there anything at all to be proud of when we look at human achievement?

Well, first of all, we are survivors: all of us alive today have overcome remarkable odds to exist. We have conquered diseases and plagues, natural disasters and our own bellicose nature. We are builders: in the last five millennia, we have literally changed the face of the earth through agriculture and livestock, through our cities and highways, through coastal and mountain resorts. The earth is now, more and more, a man-made home.

We are inventors: our inventions coupled with our technological prowess sees millions of us aloft in the air, a universe of data wirelessly connecting us, the pushing back of infirm old age for many. We are artists: we have produced celestial sounds, fine architecture, libraries full of novels, treatises and poetry, all manner of paintings and sculptures – to delight our senses, to celebrate the world and carry us beyond it.

In all of this we are creators, leaving the world in a different shape from the way we found it, making our mark in myriad ways. For some of us, it is through what we build, houses or business empires; for others it through caring or educating, inventing or producing, describing or criticizing, managing or commanding. We create the world, have made our world what it is today.

Are all these achievements not something to be proud of? We have enriched the world as we have begun to dominate it. We have to start admitting we have grown up. We are no longer a helpless and frightened child, needing the stern and watchful eye of a strict father. We are no longer at the mercy of predators or bacteria. We have usurped ever more Divine powers, from harnessing the atom to genetic manipulation, delving into the very heart of physical and biological matter. We had better become used to playing God, since we are gaining more and more access to his tools and his toys.

Through our numbers and industry, we have become the dominant factor on Earth. We decide who lives and who dies, whether whales or polar bears will survive. We determine how animals live, whether they suffer and when they die. Despite knowing little about their vastness and depth, we determine whether the oceans will be full or empty of life.

Of course, we are far from omnipotent. Despite the fact that we see the Earth as fragile, even mild earthquakes or volcanic eruptions wreak havoc. Viruses and cancers, as well as the most unlikely of accidents, still cut our lives short. And yet the most stunning progress of the last century is our ability to control our environment, ourselves and our future. This process is still accelerating. Through genetic design, we will begin to speed up our own evolution. We had better learn to master the creative responsibility that comes with these new powers.

What has feeling shame really brought us? Has it led to heartfelt remorse and change in our behaviour? Feeling shame turns our future into a self-fulfilling prophecy. We feel that this is how it has always been and always will be. Feeling shame leads to resignation and letting the world and our own civilization go down the drain. Ashamed, we believe that we richly deserve it. Shame leads to self-pity and self-loathing.

Feeling shame makes it harder to care for the natural and human world. We feel unequal to the task, since after all we are weak, stupid and insatiable. We think of ourselves as the problem rather than the solution. We start to believe that we have no place in nature. When we are ashamed of ourselves, we can only project this image of ourselves into the world, thereby turning it into reality.

When we look in the collective mirror, we can focus on our shortcomings. We can look for and find blemishes everywhere, attempt to cover them up and hope no-one will notice. We can also decide to look at what we really are, inquire into the reflection staring back at us. Insecure, yes. Irresponsible, often. Stupid, at times. But we are also powerful, with muscles we have only just begun to flex, with an imagination that seeks ever-wider horizons to measure itself against.

We see beauty everywhere, in the riotous, colourful world around us, but we also impose it, shamelessly, through art. We dream, we create and we build, making the world into our world. With self-confidence in our ability to shape the world, we can create beauty in our natural and human environment. This means protecting nature we find beautiful, out of a sense of self-confidence and power – because we can and because we want to.

God was proud of the way he created the world, or at least, if we are to believe the accounts, rather pleased with himself. Responsibility comes from confidence and pride. We must be strong to have the ability to make promises. We need to learn to be proud of a job well done, proud of the job we are doing, and proud of our vision of the future. I believe we have a duty to be proud, or more precisely, to do our ourselves proud, to make others proud.

The world is ours to change, to create, to rule over. Seeing ourselves as shameful servants unequal to the task is an excuse for inaction and leads to a damning self-fulfilling prophecy. Seeing ourselves as powerful masters, as creators in charge of our own common destiny, may feel uncomfortable but it is a role we will need to learn to assume. Of all the things I think we could very well do without in our abundant and exuberant age, I would thus single out: shame.