

Reading

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

Yuval Noah Harari - excerpt

According to Buddhism, the root of suffering is neither the feeling of pain nor of sadness nor even of meaninglessness. Rather, the real root of suffering is this never-ending and pointless pursuit of ephemeral feelings, which causes us to be in a constant state of tension, restlessness and dissatisfaction.

Due to this pursuit, the mind is never satisfied. Even when experiencing pleasure, it is not content, because it fears this feeling might soon disappear, and craves that this feeling should stay and intensify.

People are liberated from suffering not when they experience this or that fleeting pleasure, but rather when they understand the impermanent nature of all their feelings and stop craving them.

This is the aim of Buddhist meditation practices. In meditation, you are supposed to closely observe your mind and body, witness the ceaseless arising and passing of all your feelings, and realize how pointless it is to pursue them.

When the pursuit stops, the mind becomes very relaxed, clear and satisfied. All kinds of feelings go on arising and passing – joy, anger, boredom, lust – but once you stop craving particular feelings, you can just accept them for what they are. You live in the present moment instead of fantasizing about what might have been.

The resulting serenity is so profound that those who spend their lives in the frenzied pursuit of pleasant feelings can hardly imagine it. It is like a man standing for decades on the seashore, embracing certain ‘good’ waves and trying to prevent them from disintegrating, while simultaneously pushing back ‘bad’ waves to prevent them from getting near him.

Day in, day out, the man stands on the beach, driving himself crazy with this fruitless exercise. Eventually, he sits down on the sand and just allows the waves to come and go as they please. How peaceful!” **Thus ends the reading.**

Message

This Being Human

Rev Pam

The other day Karen and I were skimming through YouTube videos and found one about a young couple who changed their lives completely by building and living in a tiny house. [Tiny house](#)

They had done the normal route – gone to college, got jobs, bought the 4-bedroom home in the suburbs – but realized they were spending all of their time working to support a life that owned them – but they never got to do the things they loved like hiking and spending time in nature – even just spending time together. Their schedules were so full they hardly saw each other.

So, they did something radical. They stopped. They sold everything and built a tiny, sustainable home. They bought some land with family and have begun a business – together – building tiny houses for other people and they really love their life.

How many people here have thought about doing something like that? Going off grid – escaping from the treadmill and finding time to really live your life? I know I have – that’s why these goofy kinds of videos come up on our YouTube feed every day!

What would it look like to stop? Stop being carried away by all the shoulds and expectations of our lives? Stop allowing life to live us – and beginning choosing the life we want to live?

For me it begs a bigger question – what does it actually mean to be human? Author Yuval Noah Harari recently wrote a book titled “Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind” where he explores the concept of being human from an anthropological perspective – but it also becomes a deeply philosophical examination of our species existence through time. I know some of you have already read it because you recommended it to me – thank you!

“Sapiens” is a pretty comprehensive look at homo sapiens – starting before we even were sapiens! Harari makes a convincing case that the defining characteristic of humans is our ability to create a shared fiction – a way of seeing the world and telling a story. This fiction allows large groups of us to work together and trust one another even as our biological instincts only have the capacity for about 20 people. He writes:

Three important revolutions shaped the course of history: the cognitive revolution kick-started history about 70,000 years ago. The Agricultural Revolution sped it up about 12,000 years ago. The Scientific Revolution, which got under way only 500 years ago, may well end history and start something completely different.ⁱ *End quote*

Harari begins with homo sapiens – wise apes - overtaking all other hominids on the planet. I hadn’t realized that the picture much more accurate than those depictions of a steady progression from ape to homo sapiens. Quite a variety of humans, many of whom lived at the same time in different parts (sometimes the same parts) of the globe. We don’t know exactly how or why, but the evidence shows that at a certain point, sapiens flourished as the many other species of human died out. Harari writes:

“The period from about 70,000 years ago to about 30,000 years ago witnessed the invention of boats, oil lamps, bows and arrows and needles (essential for sewing warm clothing). The first objects that we can reliably call art date from this era... as does the first clear evidence for religion, commerce, and social stratification.ⁱⁱ” *End quote.*

“Wise apes” set themselves apart from the circle of life and edged out others on the planet during the cognitive revolutionary period and settled in for the next 20,000 years or so.

But about 12,000 years ago the second revolution took place and things really changed. For the whole of human history up to that point, we had been foragers – hunter gatherers moving around, living off the land, never having permanent settlements. But, without explanation, sapiens began to transition into farmers. And not just in one area, spreading out across the planet. Humans in the Africa, Europe, the Americas and Asia all began settling down and farming in roughly the same period of time.

Harari calls the stories we think we know about the agricultural revolution pure fantasy. I'd been taught that the this transition occurred when our ancestors got smart enough to settle down and grow their food – making life better and more predictable. But Harari says the reality is that life got harder and more dangerous. When moving about in small bands, living off the land, it only took between 5-6 hours per day to collect enough food to survive – which left lots of time for socializing and story-telling; for learning about the world and enjoying themselves.

But once Sapiens began cultivating the land, everything changed. It took many more hours per day to plant and cultivate and weed and harvest. The abundance of food brought new problems; abundant food supplies increased population growth exponentially but then all that food and more was needed to support those additional mouths to feed. In addition, living in close proximity increased disease and infant mortality – and because the land needed to be protected from others who wanted easy pickings, violence levels increased dramatically.

Our farmer ancestors were much less content and much harder working than our forager ancestors – but it happened so slowly that each generation only knew the life they were born into – and accepted that this is what it meant to be human.

Kind of sounds like familiar– right? We believe we are creating a life that will make us happy but get sucked into a story that takes on a life of its own and begins to own us instead. Harari writes:

How many young college graduates have taken demanding jobs in high-powered firms, vowing that they will work hard to earn money that will enable them to retire and pursue their real interests when they are thirty-five? But by the time they reach that age, they have large mortgages, children to school, houses in the suburbs that necessitate at least two cars per family, and a sense that life is not worth living without really good wine and expensive holidays abroad. What are they supposed to do, go back to digging up roots? No, they double their efforts and keep slaving away.”ⁱⁱⁱ *End quote.*

This was the agricultural revolution in a nutshell and it's a pattern that has shaped human life ever since. The interesting part for me is that the more impactful shift was not food production but the ability to live together in larger and larger groups. While foraging bands never got larger than 10 – 20 people – groups where it was possible to know and trust everyone around – settlements grew into empires in a ridiculously short period of time – anthropologically speaking. This is when the shared fictions known as money, government & religion came into being. A shared fiction is a story that everyone agrees upon in order to cooperate and live together in relative harmony. These three shared fictions have evolved until they are the water in which we swim, the way we understand ourselves as inhabitants of the planet, the way we understand ourselves as human beings. They describe “culture” - stories of who we are and how we do things.

According to Harari, the final trajectory-changing revolution was caused by the arrival of the scientific method – only a few short centuries ago. Just like the first two, this shift has changed what it means to be human. The first allowed humans to manipulate our environment and move to the top of the food chain. The second created mechanisms for cooperation and communication which united vast numbers of people.

The third exponentially changed our interactions with the planet itself giving us power beyond imagining. We now have within our hands the power to end all of life as we know. From a satellite's view, we have become gods with the power to change everything. Our wise ape ancestors could barely recognize the landscape in which we live and breathe and have our being. Harari writes the scientific revolution may well end history – and begin something entirely different - as unrecognizable to us as we are to members of each previous era.

So – what does all of this have to do with us on a Sunday morning. Interesting, yes. But so what? The thing which struck me most was that even as our species has “progressed” claiming more and more control over our environment, we have been unaware of how much we gave up in the process. Advances for humankind have generally not been so kind to human individuals. The more power we accrue, the more pain and suffering is experienced for most beings on the planet.

Our foraging ancestors only spent a few hours a day collecting food – and spent the rest of their time enjoying being alive – or at least being present to their lives. How much time do we have to actually simply be? With an embarrassing abundance of riches, our country allows a huge number of folks to live in poverty. We are struggling with epidemics of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and cancer – not to mention all the weird food reactions so many of us have. And that doesn't even mention the suffering of the animals we factory farm or the species we have decimated by our rapacious greed for more and more. We have a whole lot of stuff, but not a lot of life. We have not yet figured out that more might not be better – that less might be more – more happiness, more joy, more ability to be present to this life into which we have been born.

Another book I read this summer was “A New Earth” by Eckhart Tolle where he examined the evolution of the human from a spiritual perspective with some similar observations. For Tolle, the source of our problems is the egoic mind – the part of us which tells stories about who we are and what is going on. It is the ego which judges the waves coming toward the shore and which struggles to fight the “bad” waves and make more of the “good.” Tolle believes the next evolution of human consciousness will be taking control of the mind and freeing ourselves from its fears and judgements to allow us to live happily within the present moment.

On both the macro and micro levels, it is the stories we tell which shape our experience of being human. Whether we tell stories of being in control of the environment which have brought us to the brink of climatological disaster, or the stories of separation from the flow of life which make us feel isolated and not enough, the answer is the same; rejecting the shared fiction we have been born into and choosing to live from a deeper understanding of what is real.

We may not have control of the narrative of civilization. But we do have control over how we will interact with that narrative. We have control over our response. It feels like we are in the midst of a raging ocean but we can stop and notice if that is truly the case. We can observe the waves, washing one by one around us, and notice that our feet actually always touch the ground of being.

I believe this is the new consciousness – the one that Harari hints at and Tolle calls us to embrace. We each – you and me – have the ability to be co-authors. Although born into the sound and fury, we have the capacity to remember ourselves as connected to something much deeper and stronger. We can remember that we are connected to the essence of life itself. Tolle names it our true self beyond the

egoic self. It takes practice. It takes being willing to change our relationship with the world around us. It takes claiming a place of stillness on the rich and solid earth where we can connect to the eternal now and watch the churning, rolling waves – which will continue to come toward us – with both detachment and curiosity.

Rumi said that being human is like a guest house – with so many wild emotions crowding at the door. Welcome them all! All of life, everything we see and hear and experience, is a created story, but we are not helpless characters going along with the narrative.

We can choose to step outside the current stories we've been told – to sell everything and build a tiny house to make space in our lives. Or we may choose to continue living exactly as we are – but with a different awareness and response to the things happening around us. The waves will continue rolling in, but we can stop flailing about, fearing drowning when our feet are rooted solidly in the deeper reality of life.

We are inextricably connected to the whole of life. To the fiery furnaces of stars, of black holes, of “Iron and carbon and phosphorous Mixed with energy, passion and dreams.” This is our birthright, yours and mine, and the only one who can take that away from us, is us. **Blessed be and amen.**

ⁱ (Harari, 2015)

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