

I'll begin with a story.

Ellie Mae O'Hagan was one of five thousand activists gathered in Paris on a rainy December afternoon in 2015. They were rallying in the hope that they could influence the world leaders gathered at the UN's Climate Change Conference to do something, anything, that would save the future.

What she remembers most from that afternoon wasn't what happened at the rally.

What she remembers took place afterwards, as they left the Arc de Triomphe. As they rode the Metro, people talked about their bafflement, their rage, their despair; their sense of having discovered a huge government conspiracy to wipe out the human race—but one that everybody knows about and nobody seems willing to stop.

Eventually someone expressed the psychic toll in words that have stuck with her ever since. It was a chance remark: "I don't know how to be human anymore."

I don't know how to be human anymore.

When I read those words in the Baffler article that story is taken from, I could feel the truth of them in my very bones.

We all sense, I think, that this world we now inhabit is fast becoming an alien place for human beings, or at least human beings as we previously conceived ourselves.

We were never meant to live crammed into cities, with millions of us competing for food, water, air, and status; tied to screens, living under the gaze of cameras; our water poisoned, our food making us ill.

Climate change looms, carrying with it the potential destruction of the world we evolved in. Unless we act, and act soon, the ice sheets will melt, the forests will burn, our farmland will become deserts, the acidic oceans become lifeless. A 4 degree Celsius rise in temperature will

create a chaotic world, one unimaginably different from this one, one incapable of supporting civilization as we know it – and maybe not any civilization at all.

On top of that, our social and political systems are beginning to break down under the stresses of so many people, their competing visions, and their basic needs. In a vicious circle, climate change accelerates the breakdown, and the breakdown renders us less and less able to do anything about climate change.

4 degrees Celsius is right around the corner. Some small part of me welcomes that, and the end to this madness. A bigger part of me is terrified.

I don't know how to be human anymore.

When I read those words, the question came:

If being human has brought us to this point, what do we need to change about being human?

And there was a sense of opening, of possibility.

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What makes us human?

That we are tool makers? The species that laughs? Creatures possessed of speech and language? The animal capable of imagining its own death? The ability to use fire? To engage in abstract thought?

What does it mean to be human?

Human beings are capable of a great many things, and of behaving both terribly and wonderfully, and everything in between.

We abandon millions to homelessness on the streets. We spend millions rescuing puppies and kittens. We kill each other in murderous rages and in cold blood. We die trying to save a

stranger from an oncoming train. We herd people into death camps, where selfless men and women share their meager rations with the sick and aged and the young. We descend on flooded cities with a flotilla of motorboats and trucks to rescue the stranded, and distribute food and water. We close our borders. We open our homes to refugees. We demonize the other. We love unreservedly. We write manifestos of terror. We sing beautiful songs.

All of these paradoxical things are the acts of human beings. Which one will we be this day, this hour?

If we're honest, we acknowledge that those contradictory impulses and behaviors lie waiting in every one of us. We are each capable of any of these things under certain circumstances. To deny this truth is deny the complex reality of our humanness.

What does it mean to be human?

One answer comes from Abby Lammers – who says that only human beings can widen their circle of care and compassion beyond themselves and their immediate kin to include the whole world. That's a beautiful insight, one that speaks to possibility, and hope. I love that Abby is an Energy Data Analytics Engineer, a scientist.

A similar view comes from David Abram – who wrote the books *The Spell of the Sensuous* and *Becoming Animal*. He thinks that what distinguishes us most is the ability to turn our gaze outward and become fascinated with some aspect of the external world – be it fly fishing or ancient Sumerian clay tablets or butterflies.

He writes:

“So perhaps there is, indeed, something uniquely unique about our species. Yet we defy this uniqueness when we strive to assert what is most unique about humankind. Whenever we focus so exclusively upon ourselves, training our attention day after day upon the specialness of our species, then we are no longer enacting the very trait that most exemplifies our humanity. We

really display our uniquely human beauty when we cease focusing our gaze upon it and allow our attention to move outward, toward the other shapes of sensitivity and sentience with whom we compose this many-voiced biosphere. *Whenever we become intensely engaged by other styles and shapes of life, when we drop away our concern for ourselves and begin to celebrate and praise other beings and elements that exceed our exclusively human concerns, then—paradoxically—we most realize and epitomize our humanity.*”

Let’s leave that question to ripen for a bit, and move on the other question hidden in the title of my sermon.

Are these times any more uncertain than other ages or in other places?

After all, life has always been uncertain for human beings. Humans have always been subject to a great many unpredictable forces. Drought and fire. Storm and flood. Disease. Famine. Childbirth took many an infant, and sometimes their mothers. Wars took sons and brothers and fathers.

We used to call these acts of God, and they’ve always been with us, and are with us still. Many human beings in past have shared guidance and wisdom about how to deal with the uncertainties of life, and death.

It wasn’t ever easy, and it isn’t easy now.

But I think there’s something very different about this time of ours, something that points to a larger uncertainty than we have ever known before.

We are changing the world radically from the one we evolved in, so radically that our very existence as a species is at stake. We have created a world that is becoming so damaged and depleted that it soon will longer sustain us, or many other forms of life. A world in which we no longer know how to be human anymore.

And every one of us feels this at some level. Despite what the media tells us, despite the happy futurist talk of a world of driverless cars and immortality, we know in our bones that something is deeply wrong.

We know because we are deeply connected to the Earth and the biosphere we coevolved with.

Origin stories from all over the world speak of people being created from clay or dirt.

The Hebrew word for human—*adam*— derives from the term *adamah*, which in Hebrew means “ground” or “earth.” For the ancient Hebrews, to be human was to be an earthling. The first human—Adam—is a creature fashioned from the soil.

The English word *human* is cognate with the English *humus* (or soil). Both are derived from the proto-Indo-European root that signifies “earth” or “ground.”

Another term that shares the very same ancestry as *human* and *humus* is the word *humility*: the state of being close to the soil. Such etymologies suggest that, to our ancestors at least, we were most *human* when we moved in a humble relation to the things around us.

That which most deeply defines the human is our own origin in the ground beneath us, and our kinship with the ground, and all that springs from the ground, which all together comprise the world.

What is wrong is that our civilization is consuming and poisoning the world, and by consuming and poisoning the world, it is killing us as well.

This is becoming clearer by the day, and not just intuitively. We can see the damage happening all around us.

So yes.. there is something different about this time of ours. Before our time, we could count on the world we knew to be there for our children and their children’s children.

That certainty is no longer available to us.

And confronting the reality of that is challenging. Grief, despair, and denial swirl in our hearts. Hope rises and falls away, again and again. Our minds struggle to grasp the scale of our collective impact and its consequences.

The scale is so immense that our instinct is to pull back from it.

And this is what all of us have done, to one degree or another.

We deny the facts, the science. We turn to some nostalgic golden age for salvation. We imagine that technology will save us. We imagine our lifestyles can somehow survive if we simply drive the right car, or buy the right products.

We refuse to relinquish anything. Our needs and desires have become paramount.

This mindset is best illustrated by the selfie, the image that places us at the center of everything, little centers of the Universe, unironically uploaded among billions of other centers of the Universe.

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Which brings us back to Abby Lammer and David Abram. They both speak to the view that what is really important, what is really interesting, is that which lies outside ourselves. To be most human, most humane, is having or showing compassion or benevolence for others. To be most human is to be able to see the complexity and value of the other.

The more we pull back from the world, the more we shrink our circle of compassion, the more we shrink our humanity.

Our humanity lies in our outward gaze, our embrace of the world and the other, not the selfie.

The selfie is a dead end, a hall of mirrors that reflects our own image to infinity. A trap from which there is no escape except to shatter the mirrors and wake to the reality outside.

And the mirrors will shatter soon enough. They are shattering now.

One can only deny reality so long, and then reality comes seeping in, slowly at first, and then in full flood.

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How to be human in this most uncertain time?

Look outward, reach out and enlarge our circles of compassion, walk humbly. Shatter some mirrors, see what's out there. But most of all, take action.

There is an opening here. In the words of Rebecca Solnit:

It's important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine. The evidence is all around us of tremendous suffering and tremendous destruction. The hope I'm interested in is about broad perspectives with specific possibilities, ones that invite or demand that we act. It's also not a sunny everything-is-getting-better narrative, though it may be a counter to the everything-is-getting-worse narrative. You could call it an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings.

Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes — you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterward either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone.