

Show Me a Sign

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There is hope in believing that the bottom line of human nature is ultimately one of sociability, not social pathology. We know that resource sharing contracts in scope with prolonged deprivation and that human relationships which might be maintained in less troubled times tend to get sloughed off under such conditions. Accordion like, the overall pattern includes and excludes people and groups variously in expanding and contracting ranges of cooperation and solidarity, and it is driven by perceptions of relative resource advantage, if not by an interest in survival itself. We've seen this kind of movement in fine grain in our villages and towns and in relations between nations as private interests and political economies slip from good to bad, rich to poor, and back again. We've also seen a reaction to changing environmental circumstances that seeks to expand against cultural difference in wars of ideological and territorial aggrandizement, all of which are fueled by intolerance by definition. But what does this say about us as a species? About our prospects for living up to the name human in the process of managing our relations with others? Looking a little closer at ourselves under extreme conditions can provide some answers. What happens in the individual extreme, when all the strategic resource chips are down, when people know in their deprivations that they are past the point of no return, when they believe that they have no chance of resurrecting a life path that would sustain them? There is evidence to suggest that what happens is not a Hobbesian war of all against all, every man (and woman) for himself in an all out grasp for the last bread crumbs, as fearful folklore and under-informed social science would have it. In the end we are social animals.

We know that the grisly facts revealed to the liberators of Auschwitz and other concentration camps at the end of World War II included human beings gassed to death in ovens — victims of hate and cruelty beyond any sense of credibility. We also know that some of them climbed on each other's backs in an effort to escape the confines of their murderous smotherings and that some of them clawed hard enough on the walls to embed their fingernails in the concrete. But that wasn't the end of it. At some point resignation to their horrible fate set in and a sign emerged, a generalizable

item, I think, a symbol of triumph of the human spirit drawn out of the psyche in desperation and left for us like a text to be read in a twisted pile of dead men, women, and children. Many chose to die in a final physical embrace, entwining family and strangers alike. I take that as poignant and enduring evidence that we *can* matter to each other, irrespective of who we are, even (or especially) under the direst of circumstances. The ultimate concerns of life transcend what separates us as cultures, combine us in one big mirror image as a species. We could find this thought and organize it in our societies if only we knew how to look — if only we had words to impose the idea indelibly upon ourselves, to remember it in images that flare eternally in the conversations we have about others and differences, particularly when troubled times circle us up around the bonfires of our lives.

Much of the prospect for knowing or acting on this larger sense of humanity is lost to consciousness in the ordinary run of cultures and competitions for space, food, and the certainties that meaningful and satisfying lives must conform to the values of your own cultural beliefs. That's the balance point of life today and there is nothing in our current global repertoire of behaviors and persuasions to keep that pattern from devolving into dangerously competitive relationships, as we saw on September 11th in the viciously culture-bound attacks on New York City and the Pentagon — a fireball of hate and anger exploded in the face of trust. America showed another side of self-interest as it moved to embrace its own in the wake of this tragedy and began to build a levee of heroic strength, high risk relief, and soothing words to stem the tide of outrage and tears. Although retracted in scope from a global perspective and mostly unrecognized in the wrenching national pain of the moment, the prospect for global humanity known and cherished was insinuated in that resurrected solidarity. The blow knocked the wind out of most of the world. The pain was human, not just American, and thoughts of commonalities were showing up in word and gesture everywhere, including ground zero. Some unlucky souls in the tower attacks realized that they were trapped above blazing holes of concrete, steel, airplane fuel and annihilating smudge and smoke that blocked all passages of escape. They chose to jump to a certain death rather than face a terrifying immolation. Hope for the species flickered again briefly in a tiny sign on the way down. Some of the jumpers were holding hands. I don't know what you call that in anthropology. I don't know how to teach its deeper meaning to terrorists or the Taliban. I only know that it has to be said and that we have reason to hear it, all of us.