

The Big Burp and The Multi-Planetary Mandate

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Evolution is shouting a message at us. Yes, evolution herself. That imperative? Get your ass and the asses, burros, donkeys and cells of your fellow species—from bacteria to plants, fish, reptiles, and mammals—off this dangerous scrap of a planet I've given you and find new niches for life. Take The Grand Experiment Of Cells And DNA, the 3.85 billion-year Project Of Biomass, to other planets, moons, orbiting habitats, and galaxies. Give life an opportunity to thrive, to reinvent itself, to turn every old disaster, every pinwheeling galaxy, into new opportunity. Do this as the only species Nature has generated that's capable of deliberate travel beyond the atmosphere of Earth. Do it as the only species able to take on the mission of making life multi-planetary. Accept that mission or you may well eliminate yourself and all the species that depend on you—from the bacteria making folic acid and vitamin K¹ in your gut to wheat, corn, cucumbers, chickens, cows, the yeast you cultivate to make beer, and even the bacteria you use to make cheese. What's worse, if you fail to take life beyond the skies, the whole experiment of life—including rainforests, whales, and endangered species—may die in some perfectly normal cosmic catastrophe.

Where does this imperative to pierce the sky and to fly beyond the well of Earth's gravity come from? What does it have to do with the role of culture in the cosmos? And, most important, how does the relationship between culture and the cosmos tell us that space is a key to our future, a key to our evolutionary obligations, and a key to our ecological destiny?

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Let's start with a basic question whose answer may come as a surprise. What is culture and when did it begin? Culture is the multi-generational hard-drive of memory, change, and innovation. Culture transforms a record of the past into a prediction of the future; it transforms memory into tradition—into rules of how to proceed. And culture is profoundly social. It exists not just in one mind, but binds together mobs of minds in a common enterprise.

When did culture first appear in this 13.7 billion-year-old universe? The answers are surprising. Most evolutionary experts say that human culture kicked off 45,000 to 35,000 years ago. Paleontologists studying pre-historic Europe call this period The Cultural Explosion.² 45,000 to 35,000 years ago,³ men and women began to perforate, grind, polish, and drill bone, ivory, antler, shell and stone into harpoons, fish hooks, buttons, ornaments, sewing needles, and awls.⁴ Frosting the cake, humans invented music,⁵ calendars marked on pieces of antler,⁶ and paintings on the walls of caves.⁷ Then there's the **un**-standard answer about culture's beginnings, a rebel timeline of human culture that a relatively new paleoanthropological school is fighting for. This new scientific movement has made its digs in Africa, not Europe,⁸ and has come up with radically different dates. Culture, says this upstart new school, started approximately 280,000 years ago⁹ when humans invented the makeup industry,¹⁰ then followed that up with the invention of jewelry, beads, and trade.¹¹

But both of these paleoanthropological schools are wrong about the first birth of culture. Dramatically wrong. In 1997, we—myself and a cohort of colleagues—started a new discipline. Its name is paleopsychology. Paleopsychology's mandate is to “trace the evolution of sociality, mentation, cognition, and emotion from the first 10^{-32} second of the Big Bang to today.”¹² Paleopsychology is cross-disciplinary. It embraces every science that its participants can bring to the table. Activists in the field have included physicists, mathematicians, microbiologists, animal behaviorists, evolutionary biologists, evolutionary psychologists, entomologists, mycologists, anthropologists, cognitive scientists, and neurobiologists. And paleopsychology gives a far different answer to the question of culture's starting date.

Culture didn't begin 45,000 or 280,000 years ago. Culture began roughly 3.85 billion years ago.¹³ Yes, I said billion! It began when the cosmos was less than ten billion years old. It began when this planet was still so new that planetesimals—hunks of rock the size of small moons—were raining down on this globe's face, deforming this planet as savagely as the hard right of a boxer deforms the face of an opponent when it hits that contestant squarely and with full force on the side of his head.¹⁴

Culture is a social thing. And cosmic evolution set the stage for culture with a long string of social events. Much as we hate to admit it, the Big Bang was profoundly social. In its first flick, 13.7 billion years ago,¹⁵ it set the first mob in motion. It precipitated roughly 10^{88} quarks.¹⁶ Those quarks rushed into another

social process—ganging up in groups of three, trios we call protons and neutrons. The social process of trio-making involved rules of etiquette, the laws of attraction and repulsion that dictate what sort of quarks you, if you were a quark, should hook up with and what sort of quarks you should avoid. Then came another act of sociality, the shotgun marriage of protons and neutrons in families of between two and ten.¹⁷ These proton and neutron families were born of social urgency. Any neutron that didn't elbow its way into a particle cluster, any neutron that didn't join a particle gang, disintegrated after less than 10.6 minutes.¹⁸ It underwent beta decay.¹⁹ This was natural selection working on an instant scale. When it came to quarks and neutrons, only the social survived. And sociality is at culture's core.

When did another ingredient of culture— social memory, a memory that gives a foundation of knowledge, perception, and direction to an entire society—first arise? A firm answer is more elusive than you might think. Why?

For the first 300,000²⁰ years after the Big Bang, the cosmos was host to a massive social dance. Particle gangs moved at superspeed, colliding with each other like bullets smashing head to head, then bouncing away with ferocious velocity.²¹ Astonishingly, the particles involved—particularly the protons—came out of each crash with all their mass and form intact. Was this act of identity-retention a primitive form of memory? Was it tradition arisen before its time?

Then another basic of culture emerged, mass behavior. Particle families ricocheted from one smash-up to another so quickly that the speed of serial ricochets defied belief. We call this form of superspeed bump-em-car behavior a plasma. But despite all the mayhem and non-stop crashes, the plasma showed a form of coordinated social behavior that defies belief. Elbow room between particle gangs was hard to find. Yet particle clusters in synchronized swaths that went from one end of the cosmos to the other bunched together tightly then parted again. They collaborated in a cosmos-spanning Busby Berkeley style of choreography. When they crowded together, these super-synchronized chorus lines formed the peak of a wave. When the cosmos-spanning chorus lines of particle gangs gave each other just a hint of elbow room, they formed that wave's trough. These pressure waves²² washed across the cosmos like tsunamis in the sea. The physicists who discovered these early surges and swells used another metaphor to describe them—the metaphor of music.²³ Thanks to mega-mass behavior, thanks to social behavior on the grandest scale, astrophysicists say this early cosmos and its plasma rang like a massive gong²⁴...or, to put it in the words of *Science Magazine*, "The big bang had set the entire cosmos ringing like a bell."²⁵ Thanks to mega-mass behavior, the particles of this cosmos rocked and rolled to their own self-generated beat.

A mere three hundred thousand years into the universe's existence, three primitive precursors of culture's components had emerged:

- sociality,
- a primordial form of memory,
- and coordinated mass behavior.

Had we arrived at culture yet? Not by a long shot. But the first hints of its rudiments arose an astonishingly long time ago.

Remember, culture's most crucial substrate is sociality. And sociality still had a few more surprises up its sleeve before it would cough out culture.

Three hundred thousand years ABB (after the Big Bang) there came another mass astonishment, another radical act of sociality—The Big Break. The particles in the plasma slowed down (we call that deceleration “cooling”), separated, and gave each other more space.²⁶ But more space did not mean solitude...it did not mean time off from social gatherings. In fact, it meant the very opposite. Puny particles called electrons discovered for the first time in their 300,000-year existence that they were not satisfied on their own. They had an electromagnetic hunger, an electromagnetic craving for a sort of sociality this universe had never known. But there was another surprise in the offing. The **protons** at the heart of particle families discovered that they, too, felt they were missing something. They discovered that they, too, had an electromagnetic longing at their core.

The upshot of these longings in the hearts of particles was shocking. If you picture a proton as the size of the Empire State Building, an electron is so small you can hold it in your hand. Compared to the Empire-State-Building-sized proton, an electron is the size of a baseball. Or, to put it differently, a proton is more than 1,842 times as massive as an electron.²⁷ So if you and I had been around to bet on the outcome of protons' and neutrons' new electromagnetic lusts, the **last** thing we'd have guessed is that these social drives would bring electrons and protons together in tight synergies. And, even if one proton **did** manage to hook up with an electron somewhere in this cosmos, we'd have considered it a freak event, a fluke, something that could not and would not ever happen again. But we'd have been dead wrong. Three hundred thousand years ABB (after the Big Bang), electrons discovered that their needs fit the longings of protons perfectly. No matter where the electron was and no matter what its life history, pick any proton in this universe at random, flip it an electron from anywhere you please, and the fit would be more precise than anything even the makers of the ultimate hi-precision scientific device, CERN's Large Hadron Collider,²⁸ have ever been able to achieve.

In a paper in the physics magazine *PhysicaPlus*—“The Xerox Effect: On the Importance of Pre-Biotic Evolution”²⁹— I called this sort of thing manic mass production and supersynchrony. Supersynchrony refers to those landmark events in which the same thing happens at the same time all across the face of the cosmos. Supersynchrony was at work when roughly 10^{88} nearly identical

quarks precipitated at precisely the same time from the space-time manifold, from a spreading sheet of speed. Supersynchrony was at work when that vast mob of quarks appeared in every nook, cranny, and wrinkle of this huge unfolding universe.

On the other hand, the amazing number of precipitations of quarks from mere speed is manic mass production. Yes, there was variety among the first quarks. There were between eight and 18 species.³⁰ But only eight to eighteen in a cosmos that is supposedly random? And roughly 10^{87} identical copies of each quark type? Manic mass production on a scale that defies belief! Impossible. At least impossible in the eyes of our current assumptions about randomness, our notion of six monkeys at six typewriters randomly typing the works of Shakespeare. And randomly pecking out the evolution of the cosmos. But it may be time to toss the current concept of the random away. It may be time to rid ourselves of the six monkeys with six typewriters and to realize that this universe runs like a railroad train. It has a lot of freedom, yet it is rigidly constrained. A locomotive has many routes it can take to get from New York to LA, but it cannot leave the rails. It cannot plow through pastures of corn, through houses, under oceans, through wormholes, or fly the Jet Stream. A train—and our universe—have a limited number of paths they can take.

Have other instances of supersynchrony and manic mass production appeared in the evolution of the cosmos? Yes. It's happened at every turn, as we're about to see. What do supersynchrony, manic mass production and railroad trains have to do with culture and the cosmos? What do they have to do with an evolutionary imperative to take ecosystems off this fragile planet and to seed them in space? Far more than you might think.

In the Big Break approximately years 300,000 ABB (After the Big Bang) the new proton, neutron, and electron teams—atoms of helium, hydrogen, and lithium—discovered yet another social gatherer, a force of mass attraction that had never manifested itself in quite this way before. We call it gravity. And over the next 200 million years or so,³¹ this subtle, terribly weak force, gravity, created entirely new forms of sociality. Gravity swept loose atoms into new herds and flocks—into wisps of gas.³² Those gas wisps kicked off the era of the Great Gravity Crusades. Wisp battled wisp to see which could use its gravity to dragoon the most new atoms. When one wisp battled another, the larger always won, cannibalizing its competitor.³³ In the end the call of gravity that tugged atoms together led to the formation of two vast and astonishing new things—galaxies and stars.³⁴

Once again, supersynchrony and manic mass production were king. Galaxies and stars assembled by the billions, and all were pretty much the same.³⁵ Yes, there was far more variation than there had been among quarks, protons, and atoms. And the simultaneous timing was not so exquisitely precise. But when you leave Penn Station in Manhattan, there are only two directions you can

take—west to tunnels under the Hudson River or east to tunnels under the East River.³⁶ As you get farther from Manhattan, there are more switchpoints you can follow, and your options open up, they multiply. The farther this cosmos got from its first simple laws—the law of speed, the law that converts speed to matter, and the laws of attraction and repulsion—the looser the mesh of limitations that held this cosmos in its weave. The farther this unfolding universe got from the first flick of the Big Bang, the more freedom it achieved.

Roughly 20 to 30 million years after the Big Break the biggest of the stars, the grandest mega-mobs of atomic nuclei spawned by gravity from one end of the universe to the other, once again underwent something new. And these mega-mobs, high-mass stars, did their gruesome new trick pretty much at the same time.³⁷ They went nova! They collapsed upon themselves, dying with screams of photons, streams of light, and with groans of outpoured energy. It was a cosmic massacre. But it was also supersynchrony.

Nothing good should come from death. But in this cosmos, something of value usually does. The gift of the death of the first massive stars was a new form of supersynchronous social assembly, a gift of the social pressures in the crumpling stars' crunched and tortured hearts.³⁸ Until now there had only been three forms of atoms—hydrogen, helium, and lithium. But as the stars imploded, as they caved in upon themselves, the resisting nuclei of hydrogen, helium, and lithium atoms were shoved violently together, mashed in masses with a force that overrode the powers with which these nuclei normally maintained their identity. The results were four new forms of proton-neutron teams. Four new elements: iron, carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen.³⁹

In a random universe, we would have expected a million new forms of atoms or more. But this is a cosmos with railroad constraints, a cosmos where supersynchrony and manic mass production reign. Hence the number of new forms of atom-cores was pathetically tiny by the standard of six-monkey-at-six-typewriter randomness. And thanks to manic mass production, the number of precise duplicates of these four new atomic nuclei was vast.

Once again we had the primitive precursors of culture. Carbon, which was crunched together in the heart of the first generation of dying stars,⁴⁰ is a collective, a team, a tight-knit social gathering of 18 to 20 protons, neutrons, and electrons.⁴¹ And it has a primal form of tradition and memory. You can run a carbon particle-team through a host of natural catastrophes, and the atom will go through only three minor changes. Those changes are called isotopes. But the carbon atom's basic identity, its coherence as a society with its own distinct characteristics, will stubbornly remain the same. Carbon will insist on remaining carbon. This is so close to culture and tradition that it's scary.

Which raises the big question once again. When did culture begin? When did evolution go from supersynchrony to the rise of collective tradition, collective

innovation, collective differentiation, and the collective process that carries a group treasury of habits, attitudes, technology, and instructional stories from one generation to another down the line of time? Protons and carbon had a strange semblance of memory. So did stars and galaxies. Stars worked in pretty much the same way generation after generation. New galaxies assembled in forms that aped their elders. And there was something akin to tradition in the way that the first seven forms of atoms—hydrogen, helium, lithium, iron, carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen—continued to appear in era after era of cosmic change. There was even collective innovation, collective creativity. The second generation of stars, stars like ours, had new forms of atomic nuclei to chew on. And using those nuclei, they attained new powers. Inventive first-⁴² and second-generation star-deaths mashed together roughly 85 new forms of atomic nuclei, 85 new elements from scandium and titanium to potassium and platinum.⁴³ So why isn't this culture?

Because the maintenance of old ways was only a semblance of tradition and memory. It was a precursor, but not the real thing. The maintenance of identity and of old ways of doing things—things like the particle-munch in the heart of a star and the evolution of spiral arms of galaxies—was a product of the cosmos' forces, formulas, processes, and shapes. It was the persistence of the natural equivalent of railway tracks—the laws of the universe—the cosmos' rigid constraints. Supersynchrony and manic mass production weren't culture. They weren't really memory. Then what's the difference between the persistence of the laws of nature and memory? And why does nature have laws, anyway?

A railroad train follows the same precise path thousands of other trains have taken. Why? Because the rails restrict its movement. The memory is not in the train, it's in the tracks. But the form of memory that would generate culture is a guidance system inside the train itself. It's an accumulation of lessons learned from experiences that have worked and experiences that haven't. And culture is something more. It's a story, a vision, a worldview that dictates a future path, a future path that may be utterly new, utterly old, utterly right, or utterly wrong. A culture is a memory that imagines futures and makes them real. It's an internal record of the past that steers us into the unknown of the next minute, the next decade, and the next century.

The next cosmic move toward culture should be described by a study physicists, astronomers, and cosmologists have begun but haven't yet named. Astrophysics has a field—a very small one—called nucleocosmochronology. Nucleocosmochronology is dedicated to fixing the dates for the rise of the 92 natural atomic nuclei and to pinning down key dates in the evolution of the cosmos.⁴⁴ It helps folks like me, multi-disciplinary theorists, paleopsychologists, the makers of cosmic time lines, and the tellers of the cosmos' stories. It promises to help us understand when the nuclei of critical atoms like chlorine, calcium, sodium, potassium, and phosphorus first appeared.

There's need for another science to complement nucleocosmochronology. It's molecuocosmochronology, a study that establishes the dates at which the first molecules appeared.⁴⁵ Like the quark trios that make protons and neutrons, and like atoms, galaxies, and stars, a molecule is a social group, a coalition of atoms with its own distinct identity. One of the most common molecules found in space, for example, is hydrogen cyanide. Hydrogen cyanide is an atomic trio, an atomic three musketeers. It's a tightly-knit lineup of one hydrogen atom, one carbon atom and one nitrogen atom. The carbon atom at hydrogen cyanide's center holds the hydrogen atom to one of its sides and locks the nitrogen atom to its other side, as if it had linked elbows with each of its two partners to hold them together as an unstoppable team. But astrochemists and molecular astrophysicists haven't yet pinned down the date of hydrogen cyanide's first appearance in this cosmos.⁴⁶

When the number of atoms in a molecule climbs higher, our ignorance becomes worse. As Jan M. Hollis of the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, MD said in 2004, "At present ...there is no accepted theory addressing how interstellar molecules containing more than 5 atoms are formed."⁴⁷

We do know this. Carbon was the great seductress, hostess, and mix-mistress of the new element brigade.⁴⁸ And carbon's talent for introducing atoms to each other then hosting them as they gelled in stable families resulted in yet more supersynchrony. The result defied belief. It was the manic mass production of biomolecules. These carbon-based atom-teams arose in hot clouds of interstellar gas,⁴⁹ in cold clouds of interstellar gas,⁵⁰ in spicules of interstellar ice,⁵¹ in the shrouds of dying stars,⁵² in comets,⁵³ in meteorites⁵⁴ and in just about everything in between.⁵⁵ Today, ten percent of the volume of interstellar ice grains is composed of biomolecules.⁵⁶ As of 2000, we'd detected 120⁵⁷ forms of molecules in space.⁵⁸ One hundred of them were organic.⁵⁹ A mere 120 early molecules in a universe of six-monkey-and-six-typewriter randomness does not compute. The number should be in the billions. But one thing we know for sure. Manic mass production and a loose supersynchrony once again ruled. The cosmos was still hurtling down the narrow railroad tracks of cosmic destiny. Biomolecules in space included carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, methanol, ammonia polyols, dihydroxyacetones, glycerols, sugar acids, and sugar alcohols⁶⁰ (all of which swarm together in a lipid sack when exposed to water...more about the critical importance of these lipid sacks to culture later).⁶¹ And these molecules were all over the place.

The dates of molecular evolution may remain obscure, but the emergence and complexification of molecules set the stage for culture. They set the stage for the Big Belch—the emergence of REALLY complicated molecules. And they set the stage for those really big molecules' progeny, living creatures like you and me. The date of the Big Belch was far earlier than you might imagine. It was less than ten billion years ABB (after the Big Bang),⁶² just a tad more than two-thirds of the way into this cosmos' existence.

Supersynchrony suggests that the Big Belch happened on planets scattered across the length and breadth of the universe.⁶³ Manic mass production hints at the very same thing. But the only planet we are sure the Big Belch occurred on is ours, Mama Earth.

In the Big Belch, sociality went big time in a whole new way. First, this planet began its own gravitational social gathering process, its kidnap, capture, recruitment, and massing of matter from the shards of a newly-ignited sun.⁶⁴ Then came the second stage of moleculogenesis.⁶⁵ Massive teams of molecules in the deeply buried water slicks, underground water pockets, above-ground puddles, and seas of this early world wove the walls of the lipid envelopes we met a second ago, envelopes surrounding a roped-off pool of water, a microscopic inner sea. What clues hint that these envelopes were among the first mega-projects produced by the Big Belch, produced by the second-stage of moleculogenesis? Take a chunk of the Murchison meteorite. Grind it up. It contains the simple biochemicals found all over the cosmos, simple molecules wrapped around the great atomic introducer, seducer, and recruiter, carbon.

Slip the powdered bits of the Murchison meteorite into water, and the social gathering of simple biomolecules begins. Your water is rapidly filled with tiny bubbles, sacks of water surrounded by a 360-degree mesh, water balloons held together by the waterproof envelope of an interwoven⁶⁶ molecular mega-community.⁶⁷ We call that self-woven bag—that microscopic capsule of molecular fabric—a “membrane”. And membranes—bio-envelopes—produced protective play-pens for more molecular socializing. Far, far more.

A mere 9.9 billion years after the Big Bang, the molecular sociality of the Big Belch took advantage of membranes and went whole hog into moleculogenic overdrive, spitting out molecules that were enormous—chain-ganging as many as 62 million atoms into a single molecular strand.⁶⁸ Supersynchrony and manic mass production also went into overdrive, apparently producing the same massive atomic communities—the same mega-molecules—all over this planet’s face. And those massive atom-teams soon formed their own social alliances...alliances driven by something very new, culture. Culture began when these mega-teams of atoms developed internal memory,⁶⁹ braided new strategies into their molecular strands, kept the strategies that worked, reproduced them in multitudes, and discarded or packed away in the cold storage of “junk DNA” the strategies that failed. It sometimes took storing five failed strategies to construct the mega-strategy from which a breakthrough would be made.⁷⁰

These huge new atom communities were RNA and DNA. RNA and DNA were social as could be. They used membranes as fortifications, no-go zones, corrals within which RNA, DNA, and their membrane-weaving partners could maintain a

specialized mini-sea, a Jell-O or Gatorade rich in vitamins, organic molecules, enzymes,⁷¹ sugars, carbohydrates, fatty acids,⁷² and proteins.⁷³ ^

The Big Belch had produced cells. And each of these cells was a working community of 10^{11} atoms⁷⁴—a hundred trillion atoms combined to pursue a highly complex common purpose. But, more important, a hundred trillion atoms with a heritage passed on from mother to daughter, a past recorded in a literal inner-circle, an interior ring of genes.⁷⁵ A hundred trillion atoms with the ability to evade danger and to find food. A hundred trillion atoms with the ability to make future predictions based on an accumulated data base, the store of information that gene-strings cadge, corner, and maintain.⁷⁶ And a hundred trillion atoms with the ability to rejigger their collective memory's instructions on how to make the next move. A hundred trillion atoms with the ability to reprogram their instruction-set, their genome.⁷⁷ In other words, these clusters of a hundred trillion atoms contained the first molecules in the history of the cosmos to have the advantage of culture. But how did these culture-driven molecular mobile cities manage to skyhook themselves into new niches, to turn new wastes into food, and to gain new abilities? The answer, once again, is sociality.

No cell is an island. The ancestral cells we're talking about were bacteria. And no bacterium can live alone. Put a single bacterium in solitary confinement. Give it its own petri dish with agar spread across the bottom as food. The bacterium will not become pensive and reflective, enjoying its solitude. It will do the opposite. It will split over and over again, giving birth to a huge bacterial family.⁷⁸ And each new family member, in turn, will multiply like crazy to conquer more of the agar.⁷⁹ Solitary bacterial cells create communities of unbelievable size around themselves in a very short amount of time. Give them a few weeks and the total bacterial tribe in your petri dish will have a population of 7 trillion⁸⁰—more than all the humans who have ever lived. And that supersized society will not be a disorganized mass of individuals.⁸¹ Far from it. Individual bacteria share their information with a complex chemical language.⁸² The result is an information-processing web, a massively parallel-processed computation-and-connection machine, what one leading researcher on this form of social integration among bacteria, Eshel Ben-Jacob of the University of Tel Aviv, calls a "creative web."⁸³ Your bacterial culture, the bacterial mega-society in your petri dish, will be a research and development machine, a collective intelligence. According to Ben-Jacob it will be capable of spotting problems and working to solve them, often producing solutions this cosmos has never previously seen. And at the heart of that collective expansion-and-innovation web will be, guess what? A culture.

A culture complete with monuments, with pyramids. The bacterial colonies of the first 3.5 billion years of life have left us their architecture, their massive public works projects. They're called stromatolites.⁸⁴ Stromatolites are stone structures the size of your mattress, stone monuments poking from the shallow seas around Australia and fossilized in the rocks of Michigan. How are they produced?

They're created by bacterial teams contributing to a massive multi-generational enterprise. A colony of bacteria exudes a gooey foundation on which it sits. Each bacterium sucks a key portion of its food—carbon dioxide—from the shallow waters of the sea. This triggers the precipitation of particles of calcium carbonate—grains of limestone—from the water. The falling microbits of stone pile up in the glue-like base of the bacterial colony.⁸⁵ The next bacterial colony lives on top of this ultra-thin limestone residue, and in its lifetime leaves a second slick of lime. Millions or trillions of colonies later, those thin slicks of limestone add up. They create a monument nearly as big in comparison to a single bacterium as the moon is to you and me. Quite an accomplishment for creatures with collective computational powers and creativity, but without brains.

Bacteria were the founders of culture. But they were not the only cultural creatures to appear in the next 3.5 billion years of life's evolution. They were not the only culture-gifted children of the Big Belch. In 1983, John Tyler Bonner wrote a classic book on *The Evolution of Culture in Animals*.⁸⁶ Bonner revealed culture in myxobacteria, slime molds, birds, whales, social insects, and chimpanzees.

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Then came human culture, another multi-generational, multi-layered group project that accumulated memories, habits, and methods of turning new niches of barrenness into a paradise. We were born one of the most pathetic creatures this Earth has ever seen. Other animals were birthed with biological equipment for thermoregulation,⁸⁷ for making it through sizzling heat and biting cold. They were born with fur coats. Not us. We were born as naked as hairless mole rats, like pieces of meat tossed to the crocodile jaws of the elements. Like our cousins, the chimps⁸⁸ and cheetahs, we were born with a lust to eat meat. We needed this high-protein diet to fuel our energy-hungry big brains.⁸⁹ But we were born without a stitch of hunting equipment. We emerged from the womb without fangs and teeth. We were born without the four legs that give horses, gazelles, and lions their speed.

We were also born without the equipment to be successful vegetarians. Our cousins, mountain apes,⁹⁰ had huge bellies capable of breaking down the cellulose fortresses that protect the cells of leaves. We, on the other hand, had relatively tiny tummies⁹¹ that didn't stand a chance against the vegetable roughage, the greenery that surrounded us. Culture was our only means of rescuing ourselves. First we invented artificial fangs and teeth 2.5 million years ago.⁹² We invented the Oldowan stone tool kit.⁹³ Then we tamed fire⁹⁴ and invented cooking,⁹⁵ a way to predigest our meals so that our compact digestive system (and its bacterial partners)⁹⁶ could extract the fuel from the toughest foods. The small abdomen that cooking made possible gave us a mobility our knuckle-walking cousins had never possessed.⁹⁷ According to evolutionary neurobiologist John Skoyles, it also gave us the swiftness of marathon runners.⁹⁸ We couldn't outrace a zebra or an antelope, but we could outlast it in a long-distance marathon run,⁹⁹ then could take advantage of the animal's fatigue to

move in for the kill. What's more, we were the first—and so far, the only—species able to hurl a stone at high velocity with perfect aim.¹⁰⁰ We were pitchers par excellence. We could literally knock a bird out of the sky with a stone¹⁰¹ or kill a fast-moving rat or rabbit with an overhand toss.¹⁰² Which meant we could hunt small game in ways that claws and fangs had never made possible.

Somewhere along the line we also invented clothing¹⁰³ and marched off to the far north,¹⁰⁴ equipped to shield ourselves from winter snow, and ice. We also invented architecture during the ice ages, building palaces with frameworks of mammoth tusks and mammoth ribs and an outer skin made of mammoth hides.¹⁰⁵ And we invented ways to feed two needs that obsess us in a manner few animals will ever know—identity and vanity.¹⁰⁶ We invented makeup 280,000 years ago¹⁰⁷ to differentiate my tribe from yours and to let you compete for attention with your tribemates, too. We invented long-distance trade¹⁰⁸ 140,000 years ago¹⁰⁹ so that folks in the interior of a continent could show off by wearing jewelry made of sea creatures' shells¹¹⁰ and so that coastal dwellers could make tools of obsidian mined far inland. We invented beads¹¹¹ to let each other know who was on top of the tribe's wealth and who was not.¹¹² Finally, ten thousand years ago, we invented agriculture¹¹³ and cities.¹¹⁴ Cities gave birth to subcultures,¹¹⁵ and the competition between human cultures and subcultures went into overdrive.

Without material breakthroughs, human culture would never have achieved its current heights. In fact, without our host of material inventions—the spear, the fireplace, the coat, the boat, the brick, the book, and the laptop—it's very unlikely that we humans would have survived. But culture was a dance between material innovations and innovations of the mind. Human culture layered new concepts, new languages, and new forms of data-processing, data-storing, worldview-making, scenario-creating, and future prediction. Human culture worked with the multi-generational stubbornness of the bacteria that built stromatolites. But instead of constructing physical monuments the size of moons, human cultures built new mind tools—concepts, metaphors, religions, stories, creation myths, tales of legendary heroes, sagas of triumphs and defeats, and entire worldviews¹¹⁶—mind tools that from the very first were celestomaniac—sky-obsessed, turned to the heavens and the stars. These were new mind tools that could decipher the Earth below and the cosmos slowly wheeling above our heads.

One hundred and twenty five thousand generations of this layering have made us conscious...and have misled us into a peculiar arrogance. We think that we have reshaped this planet more than any creatures that have come before. We think that we have plundered the pitifully small pool of resources on this Earth and now must make sacrifices to appease a nature angered by our transgressions. We are wrong. Very wrong.

Bacteria nearly two billion years ago¹¹⁷ utterly polluted this planet's atmosphere by farting out a toxic gas that seemed to threaten all of life. That gas was oxygen.¹¹⁸ And yet other bacteria were the ones who learned to turn this poison to food and fuel.¹¹⁹ They were the ones who learned to recruit the uncountable molecules of a poison into biomass.

The mud that covers the bottom of the sea is not just a product of inanimate nature.¹²⁰ It is a massive desecration of 70% of this Earth's early rocky surface,¹²¹ a fertile sludge generated by the burrowing and swimming creatures of the sea.¹²² It is the recruitment of gazillions of inanimate atoms into the grand project of biomass.

Microbes long ago raped the naked Earth above the seas, piercing its cloak of stone.¹²³ They produced chemicals that turned much of the planet's rock into powder,¹²⁴ spat out mineral particles from which new rocks would be made, and utterly reworked the native stone of this planet. Then plants dug their roots into microscopic cracks and split the virgin bedrock.¹²⁵ If Charles Darwin is right, every fruitful field now covered with soil was the product of a massive landscaping effort left to us by millions of generations of earthworms who "sinned" against nature by doing plastic surgery on our pristine planet's face.¹²⁶ The earthworms turned jagged outcrops and crevasses into gentle hills, slopes, and valleys. We use the worms' violation of Mother Nature to grow our plants and we worship the worms' legacy— rainforests and greenery.

Meanwhile bacteria have continued to outdo us in the research and development business, constantly remaking this rocky orb. They profane the planet by following nature's imperative for the grand experiment of life—take as many inanimate molecules as you can grab and press-gang them into the family of cells and DNA. Be fruitful and multiply. Turn poisons into delicacies and barren wastes into candy. Be consumerist as hell. Be materially rapacious. Make as much of this inanimate globe as you can into biomass.

What does this mean for you and me? What does it mean for the culture of human beings? Our culture is one among many this planet has spawned. But we think our culture is unique. And it is. Our culture is built on brains and on the passions of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal-gonadal axis. Our culture is built on emotion, reason, and, literally, balls and guts. As a result, our culture froths with poetry, music, story-telling, technology, high aspirations, self-hating philosophies, and consciousness.

Our culture is also built on something no bacterium or chimp can conceive. It's built on an ancestor worship¹²⁷ that keeps our ancient trail of insights alive for hundreds of generations. We worship ancestors more than we know. In science, we invoke their names to validate our scientific claims. We refer to Plato, Aristotle, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein. We do it in our journal articles. We do it in our lectures and in our conventions. We do it all the time. In political

life, we invoke our founding fathers—Jefferson, Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton. Islam invokes the memory of Mohammed and has produced tens of thousands of pages recording nearly every moment of his life.¹²⁸ Buddhism is built on the memory of Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha.¹²⁹ And anti-globalism and anti-capitalism keep alive the spirit of the French Revolution, Karl Marx, and Michele Foucault. The result is a layer-upon-layer crepe-cake of thought-tools that builds the way that bacterial stromatolites rise from the bottom of the sea and reach for the sky. But this multi-layered monument exists in imagination and achievement. It exists as a product of human minds.¹³⁰

What can our culture—with these unique powers— do for the 3.85 billion-year experiment of the bioprocess? What can it do for the family of cells and DNA? What can it do for the mega-project of life? What, if any, is our mandate from this cosmos' history?

Our universe has shown a remarkable ability to reinvent itself and to create radically new forms—quarks, protons, galaxies, and stars—without culture and without human beings. Then the universe has used these new creations to create even more. As incarnations of nature, as the most complex forms of social dance protons have yet conceived, it is our obligation to contribute to this reinvention, to this production of massive surprises and of enormous change.

First off, we are NOT running out of resources. We are running out of ingenuity. We are using less than a quadrillionth of the resources of this planet. Geomorphologists point out that when you look at the Earth from space, “few if any natural landforms on Earth bear the unmistakable mark of life.”¹³¹ There is 1.097 sextillion cubic meters of rock, magma, and iron beneath our feet. (1,097,509,500,000,000,000,000¹³²) That's over a sextillion-cubic-meter stock of raw materials we haven't yet learned to use. We haven't yet learned to turn that sextillion-cubic-meter stockpile into fuel, food, or energy. We haven't yet recruited it into the clan of biomass, into the family of DNA. We haven't yet pulled it into the enterprise of life.

Is there any indication that we could or should transform more of this material into biomass? Yes. The first clue comes from our clever relatives bacteria. Two miles beneath your feet and mine even as we speak, bacteria are turning granite into food and fuel, into substance for the grand project of biomass.¹³³ Anything bacteria can do, we can do better.

The second clue? We are the only species that can take the DNA-and-cell experiment off this planet, off this one pitiful and fragile ball of Earth. We are the only species that can plant biomass on other planets and moons in this solar system. We are the only species that can carry life to other stars and galaxies. And taking life beyond the Earth is an absolute necessity. Why?

The next mass extinction—the next great climate catastrophe— is inevitable, no matter how many Kyoto treaties, carbon sequestration schemes, and heroes of sustainability like Al Gore we have. Let's get to the bitter bottom line. There have been roughly 142 mass extinctions on this globe.¹³⁴ That's one species apocalypse every 26 million years.¹³⁵ What's more, carbon dioxide levels in our Earth's early atmosphere were 100 to 1,000 times¹³⁶ what they are today.¹³⁷ And there were no smokestacks or tailpipes anywhere in sight. In our 226 million-year¹³⁸ sweep around the center of our galaxy,¹³⁹ we accumulate 30 million kilograms of space dust per year. Every 100,000 years we whiffle through a cloud of interplanetary powder that **triples** that amount.¹⁴⁰ These dust immersions radically change the climate on the surface of our little sphere. And every 143 million years we plow through a spiral arm of our galaxy and hit a patch of cosmic rays that plunges us into an ice age.¹⁴¹

But there's more. There have been 60 ice ages in the two million years¹⁴² since *Homo habilis*¹⁴³ began the trek that led to the evolution of you and me. What's more, in the last 120,000 years, the era of us physically modern men and women, us *Homo sapiens sapiens*,¹⁴⁴ there have been 20 global warmings,¹⁴⁵ hothouse conditions in which the planet's temperature has shot up between 10 and 18 degrees in a mere twenty years or less.¹⁴⁶ And that is just the beginning of the list of Mother Nature's atrocities. The sun itself has set us on the path to a slow boil. Good old sol is now 43% brighter—43% hotter—than it was when the Earth began.¹⁴⁷ Yet Earth has been in danger of freezing like an iceball over and over again¹⁴⁸ and has spent the last 420,000 years¹⁴⁹ in an ice age that only stopped for a brief pause roughly 12,000 years ago, when we humans were released from the deep freeze and began the steps that would lead to the invention of agriculture and cities, both of which we concocted roughly 10,000 years ago.¹⁵⁰

Just to show how many natural flukes can resculpt our weather, until 10,000 years ago the Gulf Stream shifted its route every 1,500 years,¹⁵¹ leaving former warm areas in the cold, and making former frigid zones semi-tropical. Then there's the Milankovich Effect, an eccentric wobble (a precession) in our planet's rotation around the sun that resculpts our climatic patterns every 22,000, 41,000, and 100,000 years.¹⁵²

The climatic stability we think is natural is not.¹⁵³ It is a 12,000-year-long oddity, a total departure from Mother Nature's norm.¹⁵⁴ Unless we learn far, far more about meteorological engineering than we know today, the relatively stable weather we've bathed in since the departure of the last ice age 12,000 years ago will someday change entirely. Carbon sequestration may well be our first attempt at macro-meteorological tinkering. And it may lead to far more sophisticated ways to control our climate. But we have to ditch the fantasy that every climate glitch is our fault and that we must atone by shunning consumption, by sacrificing to the planet, and by making Mother Nature happy. Mother Nature's way is instability and catastrophe. She killed off stars. And she has killed off more

species than we can count. Mother Nature, to quote a chapter title from my book *The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition Into the Forces of History*, is a “bloody bitch.”¹⁵⁵

We are a hydrophilic species. We are water lovers. Sixty percent of the humans on this globe live in coastal areas.¹⁵⁶ As Plato said, we are dotted like frogs around a pond.¹⁵⁷ And every coastal city we prize, from New York to Shanghai, will someday end up under the sea or on a mountaintop. That will happen with or without our carbon emissions. It’s happened to many a water-loving species before us. That’s why we find the fossils of sea creatures on mountain tops. The message? Without making some very big moves, all of us coastal frogs will someday either find ourselves far too high and dry or we will drown.

Mother Nature and the evolutionary process have provided a solution to the certainty of catastrophe. For 3.85 billion years, the imperative of biomass has been to accessorize the standard backbone of life¹⁵⁸—the DNA-cell system—with as many ways of making a living, of consuming the inedible, of crawling into crevasses and crannies, and of soaring to new heights as it can. With that trick, the family of DNA has ensured that when the next big mass extinction hits, some life forms will be stripped away, but other of life’s experiments, her variations on her Big Belch theme, will survive.

Bacteria are the ultimate survivors, the ultimate evangelists preaching through their actions the imperatives of evolution, the commandments of the cosmos, and the obligations of life. Lesson number one from bacteria is this. Without consumption, there would be no ecosystems. There would be no life. A bacterial colony expands by guzzling the fuel of photons, by harnessing inanimate chemistry, and by stitching lifeless atoms of nitrogen, hydrogen, and carbon into the molecules of proteins and sugars, into the weave of cell walls, into the braids of genes, and into the soup of protoplasm in between. A bacterial colony expands by recruiting, seducing, and conquering as many inanimate molecules as it can, bringing them into the family of biomass, the family of life. It expands by inventing new ways to consume.¹⁵⁹

Bacterial lesson number two. Carve out as many new niches as you can. Race with all your might and creativity to outwit the next catastrophe, nature’s next mass extinction. As we’ve mentioned, bacteria have invented ways to flourish in the toxic bath of oxygen that drowned this planet roughly two billion years ago.¹⁶⁰ They’ve learned to flourish where there is no oxygen at all.¹⁶¹ They’ve invented ways to be fruitful and multiply eating the steel of oil pipelines¹⁶² and the metal and PVC plastic¹⁶³ in the plumbing of skyscrapers.¹⁶⁴ They’ve invented ways to munch the most abundant metal in the crust of the Earth, aluminum,¹⁶⁵ and to turn it into bio-stuff. They’ve created techniques for living in plumes of water with a searing 120 degrees of heat and to press-gang inanimate sulfur atoms into the metabolic processes of life¹⁶⁶. They’ve pioneered ways to thrive in the radioactive cooling pools of nuclear plants.¹⁶⁷ They’ve shown that in all

probability they will take the carnage left by a nuclear Armageddon, eat it, and turn it into yet more mega-teams of innovators and of micro-inventors—more bacteria.

But that is the merest hint of bacteria's obsessive imperative to find new niches for life. Between fifty and five hundred trillion bacteria are in your throat and gut right now.¹⁶⁸ They've worked out a deal that makes you a niche, a portable home, and a gatherer of their groceries. The bacterial colonies in your throat defend you from hostile microorganisms,¹⁶⁹ and the bacterial colonies in your stomach and intestines digest much of your food for you. All you have to do is give them a nice, warm place in which to live. They've worked out a similar deal with migrating water fowl, who fly bacterial colonies thousands of miles, allowing them to spread intercontinentally.¹⁷⁰ Bruce Moffett, a microbiologist at the University of East London, even suspects that bacteria have worked out ways to fly high, thrive in clouds, and to make the weather they like the best.¹⁷¹ The result? Bacteria have survived every mass extinction with which this planet has threatened to wipe out biomass.

Now the trick is to spread this invention of new niches, this recruitment and radical upgrade of dead atoms, this next step in evolution that we call life, beyond one tiny, fragile nest. The biggest unfilled niche for life exists above our heads.

There's a simple trick nature has taught us via birds. There are more than twice as many bird species as species of mammals.¹⁷² The lesson? Those who fly find or create more environmental pockets of riches than those who remain earthbound.

We are the only species on the face of this planet who can fly beyond the atmosphere. We are the only beings whose culture has created spaceships. We are the only life forms who have walked on the moon. We are the only bio-mechanisms who can take ecosystems to the planets and the stars.

Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to innovate our way around every climatic catastrophe nature throws our way. It is to spread the products of the Big Belch, to expand life's unique form of manic mass production and supersynchrony. It is to find more protective niches—niches in this solar system and beyond—for the family of cells and DNA. Our evolutionary mandate is to give life a shot at pulling all of this cosmos into the evolutionary process. Our evolutionary mandate is to recruit all of this universe into the process we call nature, the process we call culture, the process we call ecosystems, the process we call life.

—end—

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