

# Life in a Processed World

by Michael Gambino • [www.natureandspirit.org](http://www.natureandspirit.org)

With measured steps I ascended the steep, rocky trail. Thickets of Mountain Laurel hung heavy with moisture from the thunderstorm that had just swept through the area. Each wisp of wind released from the canopy above a fresh rainfall to smack and sputter upon the mud and stones and the brim of my hat. Pressing onward and upward, beads of sweat in procession leapt from the tip of my nose to splashdown in rainwater pools below. Cascading woodland streams rushed and laughed with seeming exuberance towards the river below, and in the air hung an exhilarating wet-woods scent born of a thousand-and-one sources. From the union of rain-cooled air and sun-warmed earth a host of misty shapes gathered – like spirits slowly rising from their long slumber released at last from earthly bonds.

Wandering about this terrain, I am surrounded by the concurrent and eternally progressing affairs of nature: root and water patiently split gargantuan boulders; spore, nut, seed, and rhizome sprout carpets of green-hued luxury to cover the once austere remains of the area's glacial past. Countless single- and multi-celled creatures take up their forebearers' craft of taking apart both the living and the departed.

Nearby, a slender green caterpillar munching leaves becomes a warbler's meal, and subsequently becomes part of nature that is carried aloft on feathered wings. Without exception, all things in nature are on their way to becoming something else. This sprouting, maturing, mating, pupating, birthing, hunting, grazing, eating, absorbing, growing, dying, and decaying,

ing is an intricate dance. They are expressions of life. Dust to dust. . . to molecules. . . to atoms . . . in cycles. Deep within the vibrant stillness of the forest, everything is in perpetual motion, exchanging fluids, gases, chemicals, minerals, and electrons. When we pause to feel into these primal forces, we remember who and



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"LIFE HAPPENS" © MICHAEL GAMBINO

what we are. We are nature. . . Organism. . . animal. . . Self-aware beings that are *fundamentally* spirit and *temporarily* human.

Sometimes, after such a sweet and cleansing experience, we are better able to look upon the bitter aspects of our world with fresh sight, and so it

happened that my thoughts drifted to the discord of the world at large. Temporarily detached from the anxiety about the issues, I reflected on why humans have, for the most part, walked away from nature's sheltering and guiding wisdom. I wondered what could help us regain a sense of balance and sanity in our society. It is my belief that most people really want the same thing when it boils down to it: peace, love, joy, and a purpose that is beyond self. I believe this is the essence of the human spirit. So the question arises – how does our vital connection to spirit get de-valued, pushed aside, forgotten, or distorted? Why hasn't society continued to live by nature's laws rather than living above them today? There are many obvious answers to these questions, but I think the final answer is *choice*. We have chosen (albeit unknowingly much of the time) to replace our earth-awareness skills and responsibility to future generations with instant gratification and convenience.

## Tipping point

In a pivotal moment hidden in the mists of time, an ancient ancestor of ours discovered that smashing one rock against another would create a sharp-edged flake that made his/her life a bit easier. Fire making made possible our survival beyond the heat of tropical regions. Eons passed and the accumulated sacred knowledge of earth-living skills was carried forward from generation to generation. From that primordial moment of tool-making, of shaping our environment, our species developed cultures, languages, crafts, civilizations, and practical wisdom for communal living that were, at their core, governed by the laws of

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nature. The stunning and profound brilliance of these human achievements could be counted amongst the grandest in the universe.

At some point in our recent history, however, things began to change. Little by little our daily, practical relationship to the environment began to fade and with it our ability to be informed by a world of natural cycles and rhythms. No longer does the waxing or waning moon tell us stories of planting and of life. Forgotten is the importance of asking questions of the animals and plants. The spiritual symbolism of brother Coyote and brother Fox have been invalidated by calling them "vermin". Although this type of attitude towards them may have lessened a bit (because as individuals we no longer routinely raise chickens and rabbits to feed our families), they have not held a place of honor in our culture for hundreds of years. Their teachings about how to live life go largely unacknowledged today.

Communication with the beasts of forest and of prairie, once an integral part of life, is now mostly regarded as religion or delusion. Can we so easily dismiss thousands of years of traditional wisdom simply because we don't practice it ourselves?

## The Machine: our servant or master?

Choice by tiny choice, our allegiance began to drift away from our Earth Mother in favor of an exciting new love: speed. Man, smitten by the bright gleam of machinery and technology, seduced by convenience and mass-production, no longer listens intimately to the earth. Our actions ceased to be in accord with many of nature's basic principles. Instead, we became so enamored with this new

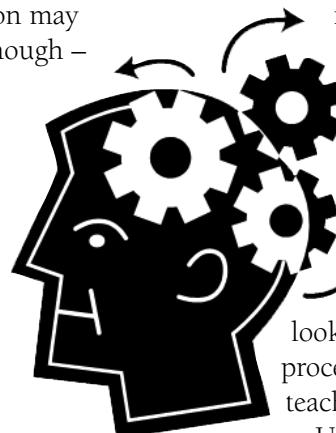
love that, unwittingly perhaps, we have enslaved ourselves and poisoned our home. The rot of plants and animals – the power of natural recycling – has been overruled in favor of the impenetrable and indigestible. A simple wooden or clay cup will return to the earth once it is no longer needed, whereas our daily discarded Styrofoam – non-oxidizing and inedible to any organism – will likely exist until the earth is engulfed by the sun.

Our craving for high-speed processing and mass-production may have started simply enough – bartering for goods, using metal tools – but now we spend most of our time "earning a living" so we have enough money to exchange for those houses, cars, food items, medicine, that we no

longer make for ourselves. As we began to let the relative few provide our vegetables and meat, build our shelters, gather our water, supply fire to heat and cook with, make clothing, tools, and everything else, we gave away our power. We've lost important and subtle skills as well as the hidden benefits provided by doing the tasks ourselves. For many, this outsourcing of production created the concept of free time and "leisure". This newfound space in our daily life was immediately filled with new products and pastimes. For many, it meant filling that "free time" with a second job or longer work weeks. For sure, a lot of interesting and useful leisure industries arose because processing speed created more and more space within the fixed time-frame of the 24-hour day. However, this accelerated outsourcing also gave rise to unwanted and unforeseen by-products such as higher stress and

anxiety, heart-disease and other illnesses, recreational drug use and abuse, personal and national debt, crime rate increase, deterioration of families, emotional and mental burn-out, and the disastrous environmental impact we are now witness to. These are the obvious consequences. One consequence that is less immediately visible, yet at the root of our worst problems, is our loss of an intimate understanding of the natural world. Beneath the

commercialization of nature for fun and profit lies the unwritten handbook for our survival and harmonious living. We are in possession of incredible potential. We have the capability to learn from everything around us and should look to all plants, animals, and processes of the earth as our teachers, guides, and mentors.



Unfortunately, the machine-mind now dictates our actions, rather than the wild, pulsating, rhythmic, balanced energies of the nature-mind. Machine technology demands eternal upgrades (an artificial evolution) often heedless of the consequences to the environment (like all those compact fluorescent bulbs containing mercury).

While it is good to make and use tools, something critical and elemental has been dropped (or beaten) out of this alchemy in modern times. The lust for power, greed, and the addiction to sensation have corrupted our original, nature-based programming. Seductive new inventions keep us blind to the invisible trade-off's we make with each new gadget or appliance we accept into our lives. We may have never had a need to make fire by friction, make clothing from animal skins, shape an arrowhead from flint, build our own shelter, read the tracks

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Iconic symbol for mass-produced junk food. The company that makes them turns out a whopping 500 million Twinkies every year. At first glance, the ingredients contain items you might expect—flour, sugar, corn syrup, etc. After that, things get a little fuzzy. With 39 different ingredients in total, this is about as far from nature as it gets... except if you then *deep fry them!*

of animals, or know the edible wild foods growing all around us. Like overly processed foods, the life-sustaining forces of self-reliance are largely eliminated from our life when we plunk down a credit card or a pile of cash to acquire our survival needs and entertain ourselves. Some of us endeavor to “fortify” our modern life by learning a few traditional skills. Those who would like to change their life-style to reflect a more natural way are often forcibly restrained by the structure of society and economics that are in place.

Important advancements in technology have undeniably provided benefits to our global society. Just as assuredly, we have created things so detrimental to our lives and the lives of countless other species that we can no longer deny the trouble we've caused. We have gone from a life-style of simple hand and tool processing of natural resources (such as hunting and using every part of an animal for food, clothing, and tools), to factory mass-processing of natural resources. As modern consumers, we have almost no idea of how all our “stuff” comes to us, nor do we know the chain of con-

sequences that are attached to these things. With each layer of processing, we have also distanced ourselves from the earth. When I wear a buckskin shirt that I have made, I feel connected to the deer and to the ancestors who did the same for thousands of years before me. I also see a living landscape—the plants and animals and the forces of nature that are required to grow a deer. I can trace my buckskin shirt back to its natural origin and therefore the understanding of cause and effect. My relationship to the landscape, to the deer, remains real, valued, vital, and precious.

Should we go back to the stone age or relinquish our advancement as a species? Of course not. But there is a vital element missing from our technological alchemy and it needs to be included in the formula from now on. We must regain the proper wisdom to wield the powers we have released. Just because we *can* do something, does not mean we *should*.

## Nature is wiser than us

Humankind is an inextricable part of the process of life on earth, and our unique gifts of free will and self-awareness combined with enormous potential come with great responsibilities. The time has come to move past the adolescence of our species as a whole into the maturity of adulthood. Wielding power requires wisdom, or we risk wounding ourselves and others. Learning from our successes and mistakes is critical, as we are now at a

pivotal point in our history. Do we retrieve the wisdom of natural laws we left behind and correct our mistakes? Or will we continue to binge on nature's all-you-can-eat buffet and stick the bill to our children's children?

Nature as a whole is much older and wiser than mankind. It is imperative that each of us work to strengthen our connection to nature's wisdom as best we can.

Are we deaf to the whisperings of our intuitive self? Perhaps we are just listening to the wrong voices each day. Let us each make time to listen to our heart speak. Begin to pay simple attention to it. We don't need to shun society and sit alone atop the mountain peaks to plug back in to the wisdom. It can begin right now, right where you are, whatever you are doing in your life. Beneath the ashes lie the embers of your true relationship to the earth. Feed and care for these embers and they will become a flame to light your way home. ♦



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