



Naturally ...

I'm pretty busy with my printmaking activities these days, but every now and then I feel the desire to get away from the workbench for a while, so I throw a few things into a backpack, and head off for one of the quiet camping spots I have discovered. I have three favourite spots: one in the woods, one by a river, and one in an isolated spot on the seacoast.

It was to my seacoast place that I went one warm afternoon last summer; my usual habit is to pitch my little tent, and stay for just 24 hours. I have a couple of simple 'rules': I never take a book with me, and I force myself not to wander too far away from my tent. The idea is to try and get my brain to settle down for at least a few hours, to stop running around doing this and that, and just to be peaceful and calm for a while.

It was beautiful weather that day, and after an enjoyable swim in the gentle surf, I pulled my body out of the sea and stretched out on the sand with the water lapping at my legs. I was soon daydreaming ...

Who am I? What am I? I seem to be just a pink and naked animal sitting on an isolated beach somewhere. All around me there is life: naked crabs on the rocks, naked fish in the sea, naked insects on the sands ... Am I really a part of all this? Does this naked human animal really belong here in this place, on this shore, on this planet? Those crabs are having no trouble 'making a living', food and shelter surrounds them. The same is true for the fish, the insects, and the other creatures living here. But what of this human animal?

If I were suddenly forced to live here in this place without tents and clothes and supermarkets ... could I survive? It seems rather doubtful. Even if I somehow managed to catch enough crabs or shellfish to avoid starvation for a few days, what then? What would I do when winter came, the cold winds blew, and the food disappeared? I really don't feel like a 'natural' creature, as all these animals around me here seem to be.

But what is 'natural' for human beings? If we need fish to eat, we make spears or traps to catch them. If we need to escape bad weather, we build shelters for protection. For human beings, being natural means building things, it means using tools. But surely, building spears and shelters and using tools leads inevitably to the creation of that huge thing that I have come here to this beach to escape the giant and noisy city.

Sitting here on this beach, my body now half buried in the sand, and washed by the waves of the ocean, it is difficult to escape the realization that I don't really belong here, but rather belong back in my concrete building, hunched over a computer screen, plate of processed food at my side. Isn't that the 'natural' way for man, the tool-using animal, to live? But if these things are true, then why does it feel so right to be lying here on this warm sand? Why?

I cannot answer these questions, neither as I sit in the sunshine on the beach, nor later as I sit typing out these thoughts for you to read. But one thing I do know, that when I pack my bag to prepare for these trips, I do so eagerly, but when I pack it to start returning home, I do so reluctantly ...

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