

Koyaanisqatsi: Seeing and unlearning a life out of balance



Image generated by Leonadro.ai

Humanity faces a deepening polycrisis marked by ecological collapse, political polarization, and institutional coordination failures. While the developed world responds to the symptoms of this "new normal" – extreme weather, megafires, megadroughts, rising poverty, fraying infrastructure – a deeper analysis is crucial for uncovering and addressing the root causes. This three-part series explores foundational questions: How did we reach this point? Where do we aspire to go? How can we navigate there?

- This first post examines how the [perceived division between humans and nature contributes to systems of great suffering](#).
- The second post advocates for [positive futures as a tool to find hope and agency in a disempowering world](#).
- The third post explores the [transformative potential of bioregionalism to reinhabit place and enhance community resilience and quality of life for all](#).

I share these posts as background and inspiration for exploring the potential of [The Bay Delta Trust](#), a new initiative for bioregional weaving and coordination.

[Koyaanisqatsi](#) (noun) Ko.yaa.nis.katsi

Definition: 1. Life out of balance. 2. Life of moral corruption and turmoil. 3. Crazy life. 4. Life in turmoil. 5. A state of life that calls for another way of living.

Origin: Hopi. According to [Hopi Dictionary: Hopiikwa Lavàytutuveni](#), the prefix *koyaanis* means "corrupted" or "chaotic", and the word *qatsi* means "life" or "existence", literally translating *koyaanisqatsi* as "chaotic life".

Sometimes I experience a feeling that I can't quite describe. I feel ungrounded. There is an empty overwhelm in my head that threatens to topple me over. I might call it a lonesome anxiety. Or maybe the unease of not feeling truly at home in my body, or in the world around me. Lately, I wonder if I am experiencing a kind of disorientation resulting from a *lack* of feeling. Am I dissociated from the direct bodily sensations I was born to feel?

On the cusp of 50 years of life, I do know that there is much at the level of sensory, somatic awareness of which I am actually unaware. My heart beats between 60 and 100 times a minute, but often it beats unheard. The temperature differential across my skin is always changing, but so often unfelt. I am a stranger to my very soma, my awareness captured instead by an endless flow of thoughts. I suspect that this separation between the "me" of

my mind and the immediate, felt sense of my "body" has caused me a lot of confusion over the years. I also suspect that I am not alone. If such dissociation has contributed to humanity's suffering, may it also be the wellspring of our deepest yearnings?

A word has long stuck with me that captures this "dis-ease", or lack of ease and harmony: "Koyaanisqatsi," a Hopi word meaning "life out of balance." The haunting images from the [classic 1982 experimental film of the same name](#) by Godfrey Reggio depict a humanity unhinged and disconnected from our matrix of nature. The film is often described as a "tone poem" for its lack of dialogue. Reggio said it was "not for lack of love of the language that these films have no words. It's because, from my point of view, our language is in a state of vast humiliation. It no longer describes the world in which we live." This may be because language cannot adequately describe the world we *feel*.

The power and problems of language

The inherent subject-object dualism in our language fosters oppositional relationships where none actually exist, evident in concepts like "mental" versus "physical" and "inside" versus "outside." We cannot have a mind without a body, and we cannot define an inside without the resultant outside. The most destructive of these dualisms is the perception of "me" versus "the world," or "humans" versus "nature." This language construction has contributed to a significant rift in our relationship with the environment, as noted by many before me (some of whom I reference below).

Although the idea of humans standing apart from nature may seem par for the course today, earlier cultures likely did not hold such a perspective. It is plausible that earlier human cultures did not view themselves as separate entities from the natural world. Non-human beings, like apes, do not perceive such separation. Although the origins of self-reflexivity remain somewhat murky, it is clear that most of humanity finds itself at an extreme remove from the rest of nature. This has led to a very different and consequential paradigm for understanding and interacting with the world from those that came before.

However and whenever it happened, some humans developed a myth that we sit apart from nature, atop the evolutionary ladder as the apex species. Our attempt to categorize the world into discrete, independent objects during the Scientific Revolution doubled down on dualism, and further cemented a separation myth. I believe that detaching ourselves from our humble origins created an existential void inside each of us. I see this separation void as an invisible wound that causes great suffering. Or picture a voracious black hole inside us that we attempt to fill with endless unhealthy strategies—overconsumption, addiction, disassociation, etc. This void may also underscore our culture's fear of the cycles of death and rebirth which represent the in-breath and out-breath of our ecological and evolutionary heritage.

Over time, this separation allowed some humans to develop a sense of dominion over nature that replaced a longstanding relationship of communion with nature. The historical shift from partnership and stewardship to domination and extraction is well-documented, particularly in the [work of Riane Eisler](#), or *Ismael*, by Daniel Quinn. The ongoing impact of this shift is less well understood and discussed. Over time, this rift has grown into a vast schism which has deadened our individual senses and defined a culture of denial and violence on grand display in the 21st century.

Normalizing the the abnormal and self-destructive

In *A Language Older Than Words*, Derrick Jensen explores the psychology of a society that has become so accepting of violence, exploitation and suffering. Evidence abounds of this cultural hallmark—global deforestation, [mass extinction](#) of plants and animals, the eradication of whole peoples, cultures and languages, abject poverty, etc. Jensen uses the phrase “silencing” to describe the process of acculturation to our new, exploitative relationship with nature and each other.

“The silencing is central to the workings of our culture. The staunch refusal to hear the voices of those we exploit is crucial to our domination of them. Religion, science, philosophy, politics, education, psychology, medicine, literature, linguistics, and art have all been pressed into service as tools to rationalize the silencing and degradation of women, children, other races, other

cultures, the natural world and its members, our emotions, our consciences, our experiences, and our cultural and personal histories."

This willful disregard for the impacts of our actions may well be a form of collective psychosis. The Algonquin word "wetiko" captures the notion of a "cannibalistic spirit" that Indigenous communities of North America observed and warned against. Author Paul Levy calls wetiko a "[disease of the soul](#)," or a "virus of selfishness." As a metaphor for the sickness of the developed world, wetiko describes a "cannibalizing force driven by insatiable greed, appetite without satisfaction, consumption as an end in itself, and war for its own sake, against other tribes, species, and nature, and even against the individual's own humanity."

This is all very dark. Thankfully, by observing and naming this phenomenon, we open a door towards healing this self-destructive worldview. Levy believes that "becoming aware of wetiko simultaneously dispels its power over us while empowering ourselves." Let us look, then, at how this "silencing" or "wetiko" has manifested in our progressive shift from shift from partnership to dominator society.

Looking through four lenses

We can find clarity by exploring this complicated picture through different lenses or levels: **individual (intrapersonal), group (interpersonal), systems (omnipersonal), and mythic (extrapersonal)** .

At the **intrapersonal** level of the individual, the impacts of our separation from our primal heritage are literally killing us. We live in a toxic culture that stems from (and is necessary to maintain) our systems of control. These systems have significant, deleterious effects on our bodies and minds. In [The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture](#), renowned physician Gabor Mate chronicles the worsening epidemic of chronic illness and poor health in the developed world.

"Much illness [is] not a cruel twist of fate or some nefarious mystery but rather an expected and therefore normal consequence of abnormal, unnatural circumstances..." "Disconnection in all its

guises — alienation, loneliness, loss of meaning, and dislocation — is becoming our culture's most plentiful product. No wonder we are more addicted, chronically ill, and mentally disordered than ever before, enfeebled as we are by such malnourishment of mind, body and soul."

Looking at the **interpersonal** level of relationships and groups, we see fraying bonds between individuals on a societal scale. Both the [loneliness epidemic](#) and the plague of political polarization can be viewed as symptoms of the underlying, existential isolation arising from our separation from nature. This separation manifests in a lack of a feeling of true belonging and, conversely, a mistrust of others or the world around us. In the *Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley [speaks to the existential isolation and chasm of separation](#) experienced by individuals in the developed world:

"By its very nature, every embodied spirit is doomed to suffer and enjoy in solitude. Sensations, feelings, insights, fancies – all these are private and, except through symbols and at second hand, incommunicable. We can pool information about experiences, but never the experiences themselves."

At the **omnipersonal** level of systems, we observe the many systemic crises humanity faces today. We can even roll them up into the *en vogue* notion of a crisis of crises, or "[polycrisis](#)." The whole of these many crises—economic, political, ecological, and otherwise—has become more entangled and confounding than the sum of the parts. Our dominator control systems can no longer manage the scale of their self-terminating [externalities](#). Microplastics found in a mother's milk or towns in the Southwestern U.S. running out of water demonstrate economics far out of sync with basic ecological realities.

Finally, at the mythic level, what might be called the "**extra-personal**", we feel the stories that guide culture, and orient individuals, groups and whole systems to certain lifeways.

Much could be said of the mythology that underpins modern society and the developed world. I believe it is fair to say that technological progress and perpetual growth has taken on a quasi-mythical status, along with a belief in continuous economic growth and

technological advancement as drivers of societal well-being and progress. This myth posits nature as a resource rather than a source, something to be used rather than honored.

Alan Watts describes the “Ceramic Model” as the predominant myth of Judeo-Christian-Islamic culture which posits the world as being made of inanimate “stuff”, or clay, created by a disincarnate divine presence, or “potter.” This omnipotent “potter” then created humans in the same image, and a sense that we are a construct, or artifacts that have been made. In contrast, other creation myths tell a fundamentally different story about the world. To quote Watts: “[T]here is the Hindu view of the world which is dramatic; looks on it as a play. And then the Chinese view, which is organic and looks upon the world as an organism; a body.” ([Listen to this lovely talk by Watts for further context.](#)) Core to these worldviews is the notion of interrelationships, whether it be all the actors on the same stage, or all the parts making the whole of an organism.

And, according to Watts, Ceramic Model changed during the scientific revolution of the 19th Century into the myth of the “Fully Automatic Model” that the developed world lives today. This is a story in which reality is composed of “blind energy,” an unintelligent force, stripped of a divine presence yet over which humans still maintain the potter’s control and authority.

The power of myth

Feeling into these different myths, and grappling with their implications, I am struck by the deep absence of a sense of belonging. In the paradigm of the non-indigenous developed world, and across the individual, group and systemic levels, there is no overarching feeling of home. Instead, we suffer the great American myth of [rugged individualism](#) in which individuals can and must succeed alone, outside of systems of support.

I am also struck by the incredible, transformative opportunity of new stories and modern myths. Joseph Campbell elucidated [four functions necessary for a vital, living mythology](#):

- The **mystical (or metaphysical) function** inspires in the individual a sense of awe and gratitude in relation to the mystery dimension of the universe.

- The **cosmological function** presents an image of the universe that links local knowledge and individual experience to that mystery dimension.
- The **sociological function** validates, supports, and imprints on the individual the norms of that society.
- The **psychological (or pedagogical) function** serves to guide each individual through the stages of life, within the context of that culture.

Taken together, these functions orient the individual to lifeways integrated on the intrapersonal, interpersonal, omnipersonal and extrapersonal levels. As we have seen, the developed world suffers from an impoverished worldview. Our stories blind us to the humbling truth that humans are but a single thread in the vibrant fabric of life's vast tapestry. Without the deep meaning and "awe"-some knowing derived from understanding our interdependence with nature, we are living a life out of balance.

The places of our being and belonging

If we are honest with ourselves, if we really listen to what makes our hearts sing, if we take the time to feel the sunshine and water on our skin, I think each of us will acknowledge that something is deeply awry. We need not look to fires or droughts or floods or famines or wars for validation of what we know in our blood and bones. As difficult and scary as it may be to look this in the eye, I believe it is a path of liberation that opens many opportunities.

We must undertake this exercise to create the space for dreaming and feeling into new possibilities for human life and society on this planet. In the second and third posts in this series, I advocate for the power of positive futures to carve out the potential for the adjacent possible in service of the future probable, as well as bioregionalism as an opportunity for healing our relationship to nature and exploring new models of governance, economy and culture.

By acknowledging our existential crisis of separation and its role in the polycrisis, we are able to envision new ways of being that align with nature. If we are not aligned with nature, we are not aligned with ourselves. It is time for a great remembering and a long overdue return home, to the places of our being and belonging.

- - - -

Thank you for reading! In the next part of this series, I will explore the potential of positive futures to bring renewed hope and agency to our world-changing efforts. If any of this resonates, or if you have some quibbles to share, I would love to hear from you.

- Send me a message or schedule a time to talk about how we can move these ideas forward together.
- Sign up to receive updates about [The Bay Delta Trust](#), a community weaving and coordination initiative to improve resilience and quality of life for all in the San Francisco Bay/Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta bioregion.

- - - -

Special thanks to the many friends who reviewed and commented on this piece, including Eric Sjoberg, Kevin Bayuk, Zach Laurie, Neal Gorenflo.