

Chapter 12

Beyond Daniel Quinn

This chapter is an expanded book review which I am including in this book because I believe that this dialogue with Daniel Quinn is a significant clarification of what “beyond civilization” means. Quinn composed a book entitled *Beyond Civilization: Humanity’s Next Great Adventure* (Harmony Books 1999).

Daniel Quinn is the author of *Ishmael, My Ishmael: A Sequel, The Story of B*, and *Providence: The Story of a Fifty-Year Vision Quest*. He has clarified his perspective still further in *Beyond Civilization*, a book comprised of 176 one-page chapters, each aimed at clarifying confusions in his social vision.

I am convinced, as I stated in the last chapter, that there can be no viable long-term solution to our planetary crisis unless we project our social vision beyond the bounds of “saving civilization” toward the audacious challenge of building a post-civilization mode of social existence. I certainly count Quinn a colleague with respect to this basic conclusion.

In my dialogue with Quinn, I want to do these three tasks: (1) summarize Quinn’s basic tenets, (2) indicate some of the ways his latest book has clarified for me Quinn’s perspective, and (3) say why I feel Quinn’s perspective is an oversimplification, the type of oversimplification that defeats actually moving in the valid directions that he is calling us to consider.

(1) Quinn’s Basic Tenets

1. There have been two basic modes of social existence in the history of our species: the tribal mode and the civilizational mode.

2. The tribal mode of social existence was developed by a process of natural selection over tens of thousands of years and it worked well for all that vast time. It still works well wherever it is given room to operate and is competently applied.

3. The civilizational mode of social existence, in spite of all its great powers, has had, from the beginning, basic flaws. Now after less than 10,000 years of development, these basic flaws have come into full flower and are destroying the planet as a viable habitat for humanity. As an option for the future, civilization is a failed system of social organization.

4. In order to survive and to enjoy a maximally prosperous and humane life, we must walk away, one by one and region by region, from the civilizational mode of earning our living from this planet.

5. We must walk toward a third mode of social organization, not a return to ethnic tribalism, but an advance toward a new sort of tribal society. “Tribal” here means a way of earning our living from the planet that is not hierarchically organized, not founded on the centralization of wealth and power, not creating wealth and privilege for the few and a prison of work-slavery for the rest. Only such a post-civilization tribalism can resolve the current ecological crisis as well as restrain the exploding human population.

6. Agricultural food production is a core cause of our population explosion and the ecological ruination of the planet. Civilization began not with the invention of gardening but with the ownership of stored food. Once food surpluses are stored, they must be guarded by their

owners and policing forces. This brings into being a hierarchical order. On the top are the owners and their hired guards. Below are the producers who must work not only for their own living but to support the food storage system and its owners and protectors. This basic structure may seem innocent and practical at first glance, for it provides a solution for leveling out the times of plenty with the times of famine. But not all the consequences of this new structure are beneficial. The owners, who might wish everyone to think of them as useful servants of the social whole, actually become persons of privilege and of excesses that seem to have no limits. Meanwhile the actual producers of this seemingly unlimited wealth are turned into prisoners of a system that requires of them more and more work and less and less participation in deciding what work is worth doing. In addition, these workers become, for the owners, a part of their wealth. It is to the owners' advantage for there to be more workers. Civilization, and thus the wealth of the owners, grows by having more food to feed more workers who produce more food to feed more workers who produce more food to feed more workers. . . . This is the core dynamic beneath the population explosion. Tribal society did not produce more food than they could eat nor an exponentially expanding population of eaters.

7. We tend to be blind to the full implications of our historical dilemma because we are accustomed to thinking of civilization as synonymous with "good society." We feel that civilization is at least a necessary evil for which there is no viable option. Furthermore, tribal life has been given a derogatory billing in the taken-for-granted perspectives of civilized people. Tribal society has been seen as obsolete, groveling, and even savage.

But actually tribal life, though imperfect like all human institutions, provided for its members very well. Except in times of extreme catastrophe, there was no poverty for anyone. And while tribal life had a few wealthier folk and a few strong leaders, no one was given the excessive prerogatives that have been standard for the wealthy and powerful in every civilization. In tribal society, everyone, including women and children, participated in various decision-making processes. And no one was excessively overworked. Usually, a few hours a day of meaningful, survival-necessitated work sufficed, leaving ample time for celebration and storytelling and art and dancing and family life for everyone. Even our most advanced, industrialized forms of civilization cannot boast of such accomplishments. It is true that ancient tribalism did not provide anyone with the wealth enjoyed by modern civilization's upper classes. But a next form of tribal society could easily provide everyone (assuming a reducing global population and appropriate technologies) with a modest prosperity and time to enjoy it. And as for being savage, ancient tribal life was peace-loving compared to the perpetual war-making of almost every civilization. Tribal warfare was, in comparison with civilization's massive killing sprees, a quite limited ritual of warrior sacrifices employed essentially for practical purposes like negotiating tribal hunting grounds.

8. The way forward to a post-civilization form of tribalism is not attacking civilization with a frontal attack, but simply withdrawing our support. The way forward is simply **walking away from civilization** toward the next social form of earning our living from the planet. Civilization is prepared to defend itself from any attacks from below. It has been successfully doing that for at least 6,000 years. Also, if our attacks from below win, we are stuck with running the civilization we have conquered. This accomplishes nothing in the way of lasting effective change. **We must simply walk away.** Against this strategy, no civilization has an adequate defense. This, Quinn claims, is what happened to Mayan and other early civilizations on the northern and southern American continents. People became fed up with their civilization and simply walked away, reestablishing some form of tribal society. The Mayan people have not disappeared, only the Mayan civilizations. Quinn is clear that today we do not have the luxury of adequate forests to walk away into. Reestablishing ethnic tribal societies planet-wide is not

possible. But we can, Quinn claims, still walk away from civilization toward something new, toward social experiments that are more tribal than civilizational in nature.

9. There is no right way of doing human society. Uniformity is one of the flaws of the civilizational mode of thinking. The very idea that there is one right way of doing society has become an obsolete notion. Let every group create whatever tribal type of life they find appropriate in their place given their opportunities, needs, talents, etc.

(2) New Clarities in Quinn's Latest Book

The above summary was done in my own words and may borrow some from Quinn's latest book as well as from his earlier books. I found the latest book clarifying on a number of points. I will list some of them.

1. I got the impression from some of Quinn's earlier writings that he was saying that civilization came into being with settled agriculture. This book clarified that pre-civilizational tribal societies initiated agricultural food production and settled village life. It was not gardening or simple agriculture that overthrew the tribal way of life; it was food storage and the hierarchy that went with it. I think this is a very important point. "Post-civilization" does not need to mean post-agriculture in the sense of no longer growing food. Rather, "post-civilization" means post-hierarchical systems of ownership and control of agricultural and other surpluses.

2. I got the impression from some of Quinn's earlier writings that he was assuming that we could return to a tribal form of life that was very little different from the type that existed before civilizations came into being. In this latest book, Quinn clarified for me that his new tribalism will be significantly different from the ethnic tribalisms of old.

3. I also saw more clearly in this book what Quinn meant by "walking away from civilization." He does not mean walking away from technology or our other accumulated wisdoms. He does not mean finding some deserted place on the planet where a small group can start over. He means walking away from a specific means of earning our living, namely from owning, organizing, or working for hierarchical, enslaving, earth-destroying institutions. In principle, a wealthy owner of some business could choose to thoroughly transform the character of that owned institution toward a more tribal style of working together. Quinn is also clear that, for now, any tribal-style business must survive within and sell to the current fabrics of civilization.

In this recent book Quinn makes clear that the next society must grow within the current society, gradually sapping its energy over the next 100 years or more. Eventually civilization will die from a lack of human support. Eventually, very few will work for the civilization-style institutions. Eventually, few will defend the existence of such institutions. Most people will simply do something else.

It may be, Quinn says, that a few civilizations will continue to exist as backwater anachronisms for a few centuries into the future. This, Quinn claims, would not be disastrous. The disaster we must avoid is for the mode of civilization to continue its dominance – to continue growing in its power and numbers of citizens.

(3) My Critique of Quinn's Oversimplifications

I basically agree with Quinn's perspective if it is fully and properly understood. But something more must be said. Some critical oversimplifications considerably mar the practicality of his vision.

1. Quinn emphasizes the economic issues and proposes a basically economic solution. We need, he says, to walk away from the civilizational way of earning our living and take up another way of earning our living. Quinn's solution is correctly reflecting this actuality: economic tyranny within our current civilizational modes is the overtly destructive factor. But Quinn tends to improperly de-emphasize the cultural aspects of the necessary transformation. This simplification is not always obvious, because Quinn is clear that civilization's economic modes are sustained by a system of cultural beliefs that must also be changed. Quinn sees the necessity of a profound cultural change in our basic attitudes toward earning our living and our associations for doing so. But he does not explore other crucial aspects of the cultural revolution that are also necessary if we are to achieve the far-reaching changes he envisions.

For example, the overthrow of patriarchy and the establishment of a male-female balance of consciousness and power is given very little emphasis. It is not true that economic changes will automatically carry out the women's revolution. Furthermore, it will take a full completion of the women's revolution to carry out the economic changes. A similar argument could be made for the needed changes in attitude and life style relative to our participation in the natural life of the planet. As long as humanity hates the human body and resists experiencing our connectedness with the larger body of life on this planet, no fully wholesome solution to the ecological crisis can be achieved. If the people who comprise these post-civilization tribes hate nature and despise their own bodies, they will not do what needs to be done. Similarly, racial and religious bigotry are cultural issues of an immense magnitude, and they are not resolved by merely walking away from the current economic system. The new social forms (tribal or whatever they are) will not be sustainable if they are riddled with bigotry, patriarchy, or escapism from our natural existence. So, in addition to walking away from old modes of earning our living, we must also walk away from some very specific, antiquated qualities of human culture.

2. Similarly, Quinn underemphasizes the political aspects of the necessary social transformation. He touches upon the need for new political fabrics when he speaks of a tribe of tribes, but this vision has not, in my opinion, been carefully thought through. It needs to be. A nonhierarchical polity on a region-wide or continent-wide or planet-wide basis has not yet existed at any time in human history. The ancient tribal forms were nonhierarchical, but they were local groups or sometimes local groups in very loose regional confederations. Our necessary care for the entire planet, including all its resources and life forms, will require more organization than very loose associations of autonomous local groups. We must indeed give up the notion of the sovereignty of our nation-states and re-empower local communities. But local humanity cannot become sovereign either. All forms of sovereignty will have to give way to a planet-wide interdependence. Therefore, we have this question on our hands: What political forms will be appropriate at regional, continental, and planetary scopes of governance? How can these scopes of governance allow a certain local autonomy and power rather than being hierarchically oppressive of local groups of humanity? These questions Quinn does not address. So, in addition to walking away from old modes of earning our living, we must also walk away from hierarchical governance at every scope of decision making, and then reconstruct nonhierarchical decision making that works effectively at every scope of governance.

3. Further, Quinn oversimplifies by implying that no well-organized movements for social change are needed. He seems to imply that each of us, more or less on our own, can just walk away from current society and begin joining up with others who are also walking away. This may have worked for a disgusted Mayan population, for they could walk away into the woods and back into a tribal mode of life with which they were somewhat familiar. But this will not work for us. We will have to organize or join well-organized movements for social change – movements which will experiment with social forms never tried before. These movements will

also be needed to ethically and materially support us in our successes and failures as we attempt to build the not yet conceived societies of the future. These movements will have to be able to nurture us and perpetually train us for the unprecedented transformations that face us. These new movements will have to be religious movements in the sense that they will need to assist us to access the deepest powers of our humanity – powers we will need in order to accomplish the tasks that we will need to do.

4. Next, Quinn does not grapple deeply with the following strategic polarity: (1) On the one hand, we must indeed walk away from the current modes of social operation and design a radically new mode of society. (2) At the same time, we must work within the present economic, political, and cultural structures – assisting those structures to die gracefully, making a nondestructive transition to the new structures, while holding in check powerful reactionary tendencies.

Here in the United States, for example, two styles of political purpose are locked in battle. One wishes government to be less supportive of the most vulnerable and more supportive of the rulership of the corporations. The other wishes government to be a more supportive of the neglected and more active in refereeing the economic playing field and thus protecting citizens and environmental well-being from the irrational and arrogant use of corporate power. We, the movements for radical social transformation, must not walk away from this conflict. It is imperative that the second style of governing win this fight even though the institutions within which this winning takes place may need to be replaced later on. In the United States this probably means phasing out the Republican party and cleansing the Democratic Party of its Republican elements. If this nation must have a two-party system, let it be the best of the Democratic left of center versus a fully Green/Populist/Progressive party who see that governing our lives through the World Trade Organization is an ecological and social disaster. Such changes are implied when we ask for truly effective campaign finance reform and a victory for effective political refereeing of the economic playing field. While these changes are being pursued within the context of saving civilization rather than replacing it, we, the post-civilization vanguard here in the U.S., need to support these changes while we also build a constituency that leans still further into the future.

Similarly, I don't subscribe to the implication made by some that we can simply allow our current institutions to decay into their worst possible forms, since we must eventually replace them anyhow. It is true that we must, over the long haul, build fundamentally better institutions. It is also true that many economic, religious, and educational institutions could be abandoned immediately. But for other institutions, especially our political ones, abandonment is not the appropriate choice even though, in the long-range, the replacement of these institutions is required. Our current democratic institutions need to be enabled to do the best they can to hold in check the powers of corporate rulership and other reactionary tendencies. While the current political institutions of the developed world can be viewed as temporary, transitional institutions, they are transitional; that is, they are needed for the transition toward a full blown post-civilizational era.

5. Finally, the overall image of "walking away from civilization," while deeply helpful as an image that clarifies our fundamental vision, can be misleading and confusing. Various types of reactionaries, anarchists, and just plain loonies have been walking away from civilization for centuries. This is not the type of "walking away" we need. The type of "walking away" we need does not walk away from our actual necessities and complexities, or from the terrors of an ambiguous historical process. Quinn is somewhat clear about this: he realizes that our proper leaving entails swimming through the river of our existing social arrangements. He knows that we cannot simply jump to the post-civilization world without getting wet in the river of our

actual era. Quinn is also clear that we are not walking away from 100 percent of our cultural conditioning and social processes. Only a few key cultural genes or “memes,” as he calls them, need to be turned off. The rest of our cultural inheritance can be conserved. These considerations mean that “walking away” from civilization is complex. It means leaving some very crucial things behind and carrying other very crucial things forward. Which are which? Such complexity exists not only for our basic cultural conditioning, but also for our economic and political processes as well. We do not need to leave behind scientific research, technological prowess, basic democratic practices, the abolition of slavery, the liberation of women, the futility of all-out warfare, the affirmation of racial and religious diversity. All these well-established accomplishments and trends can be seen as preparation for (perhaps early manifestations of) the post-civilization mode of social organization.

Ecological solutions are also complex. While the movement toward ecological sanity and personal bonding with all living beings can be meaningfully interpreted as a return to tribal values, the form of our emerging ecological practice will be quite different from that of ancient tribes. No pre-civilizational tribe ever faced the need for a scientifically lucid and technologically accurate form of whole-planet responsibility. Thus, it seems clear that we must carry with us into the future many of civilization’s good qualities as we walk away from the basic hierarchical arrangements we have called “civilization.”

What then are the enduring values of the civilizational mode of living? This is an important question – as important as: “What are the enduring values of the tribal mode of living?” If we are lucky, wise, and persistent, we will be moving toward a society that is just as post-tribal as it is post-civilizational. We will be carrying forward gifts from both of these modes of social organization, and we will be inventing a new mode of social organization that has never before existed. All this is complex beyond anything I have said here, or that Quinn has said in his books.

Precisely because we long for simplification – a simplification we can understand and practice easily--any vision that oversimplifies our situation is tempting to us. But oversimplification can be exceedingly dangerous, for it tends to close us off from the chaos of complexity that we must embrace and love and live if we are going to actually succeed in “making it” into “humanity’s next great adventure.”