

Room for a view

## The end of the other

"Humanity does not have a long fuse and this generation holds the last match."

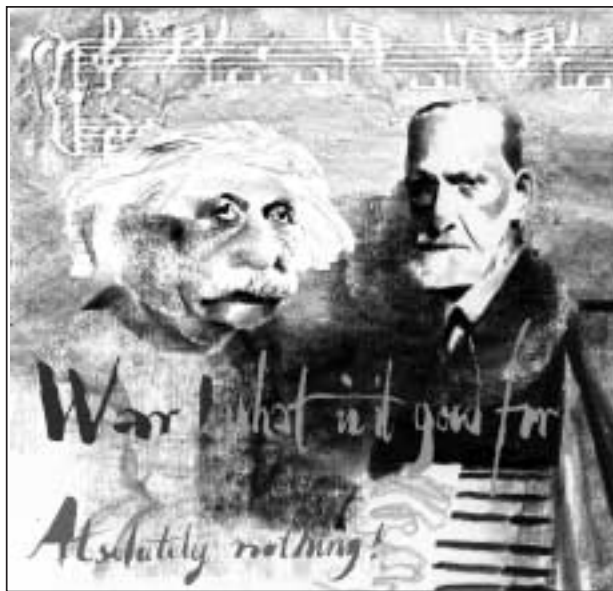
— JonArno Lawson, "Bad News." From *The Noon Whistle*, 1996

Freud theorized that the duality of human nature sprang from two instincts: Eros and Thanatos. He saw Eros, the life instinct, as love and sexuality in the broadest sense and Thanatos, the death instinct, as aggression. For Freud, Thanatos, also termed the death wish, was grounded in the law of entropy — that is, the tendency of all systems to eventually reach their lowest level of energy. Eros is the drive toward attraction and reproduction; Thanatos, the drive toward repulsion and destruction. The former leads to multiplication of the species; the latter, to its elimination. Freud saw the two instincts as being in a constant dynamic tension with each other.

The postulate of the death instinct has not endured. It flies in the face of intuitive knowledge that our basic instincts are always in the service of survival. Yet humanity, on a number of fronts, appears to be heading for its own extinction. Are we, as a species, realizing Freud's prediction? Do we, as a species, have a death wish?

We are first fed by blood. It flows from our mothers, whose nutrients become ours. We are, in a physical sense, connected. In birth, the cord is broken and we must find connection again to survive. So blood becomes milk. But whoever or whatever thwarts our hunger evokes a desperate rage. On the substrate of these biological imperatives rest the social constructs of connection, competition and control. These are the generic forms of motivation that drive all human activity. The alchemy of human culture and civilization transforms them from their biological roots into

their social manifestations. Milk in this world becomes, among other things, money. Yet, at some level, the dictates of survival persist: the pleasure of being fed, and the aggression that results from the fear that we won't be. Paradoxically, the instinct to survive has brought our species to the brink of self-extinction.



Fred Sebastian

The paradox stems from the separation of *self* and *other*. Identity exists at the level of the individual — you and me — or of the group — them and us. An individual or group against whom we are competing is not us. They are foreign, alien, *other*. For a group to survive and thrive, it must somehow resolve or contain the competitive strains within itself; in that sense, it must overcome its own biology or else self-destruct. But no such limitation applies to the *other* — to them. In the vigilantism of war, either we kill them or they will kill us.

The surrounding environment is also *other*. The process of civilization attempts to control the physical world and the other species for our own uses. Thus, the human race has grown more and more to see itself as separate from

the surrounding natural world rather than as a part of it.

With the proliferation of annihilating weaponry and ever-increasing environmental degradation we have reached the edge of the *other*. The weapons that defeat our enemies also destroy us. Victory now equals defeat. Taming nature has become destroying it. Competition and control are no longer an adaptive means of survival but rather, if unrestrained, a potential means of collective suicide.

By far our most pressing common concern is surviving our aggregate selves. In this predicament, *self* and *other* collapse. No nation is safe unless all are safe. The natural world, if not provided for, will not provide for us.

We have arrived, unintentionally, at Thanatos, not by a drive to die but by a wish to live. We have arrived here by striving for what we hoped would ensure and benefit the survival of ourselves and our peoples.

In the full reality of competition and control the *self* is inextricably intertwined with, rather than separate from, the *other*. It is an illusion that we can eradicate our enemies or ransack the earth with impunity. This is a lesson that challenges the biological legacy of our innate brutish survival instincts. It is one that we learn, forget and must keep relearning as our increasingly complex and interconnected societies encroach more and more on the planet. At the dawn of the 21st century, we have reached the point where every individual fate is tied directly and vitally to the greater group of all humanity and the larger sphere of the entire natural world.

We are at the end of the other. The last frontier — ourselves.

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