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ATUL SHAH INTERVIEWS ARTIST AND ECOLOGIST DR. MICHAEL TOBIAS ABOUT THE FUNDAMENTAL NATURE OF LEADERSHIP



1). What does nature say about leadership?

MT: This is a compelling question, and one that is impossible to know, because despite tens-of-thousands of years of speculation on our part, we *Homo sapiens* are part of nature as much as any bacterium, tulip, or blue whale. **We are who we are because we are nature.** Many historians and biologists have argued that we are somehow outside of nature; that our ability to think about our own ideas and ideals, gives us an edge against the blunt realities of a cold harsh world. Our ideals nurture hope and compassion; our rationality supposedly uncovers the right questions and answers. But there is one lesson that nature has taught us above all others that we continue to ignore, namely, the criteria for any organism to survive. A universal lesson has emerged, and it is Malthusian to the extreme: when a species becomes overpopulated there is nothing it can do gracefully to equitably ensure the distribution of survival rations. This is called boom-and-bust behavior, whereby species undergo harsh fluctuations in their numbers. In some cases a species can lose 90% of its entire population in one season from a lack of food in combination with disease and weather extremes. **At nearly 6.8 billion individuals our species, by almost every calculation, is ecologically in a boom scenario.** Such biological "success" is no success at all. We are seeing the consequences. Our ecological footprint is laying waste to the planet, with subsequent ripple effects that are marginalizing billions of human individuals. True conservation leadership would support the United Nations stance on family planning, which translates to: Every child a wanted child. It would also compel nations to adopt population stabilization policies, provide tax incentives for childless or one-child families, and distribute the costs of taxes and insurance premiums such that those parents who chose to have larger families must be appropriately taxed for their larger household ecological footprints. That would be one brave and critically important leadership adjustment.

2) What kind of leadership is sustainable, in your opinion and research?

MT: President Obama's statement upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize that he, in essence, responds to a world that *is*, recalls a similar remark once uttered by William Wordsworth, namely, that the world is too much with us. **The earth demands balance and we have not yet understood the mechanisms at work that reconcile our proclivities for goods and services,** multiplied by the intensity of our consumption, technologies, and resource extraction, with the interdependencies upon which all species might co-inhabit the planet. Hence, the fact we are currently in the midst of the Sixth Great Extinction Spasm in the last 4.1 billion years of biological history is virtually ignored by most of our kind. If you Google "sustainability" you are likely to see some 55 million different points of view. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharial Nehru, was once asked about India's population problem. He replied that there are 300 million population problems in his country, meaning that every individual citizen of the newly democratic India had to assist in the effort of sustainability. That meant, and means even more so today, that he/she be tolerant, be generous, be moderate, be thoughtful, and live life in a balanced manner. By sustainability most people these days think of recycling, alternative energy, lowering our individual consumption and carbon footprint. **But true sustainability is ultimately about the biological bottom-line: how our one species among possibly more than 100 million other species can exert a minimum of violence.** This is where the great and myriad spiritual and artistic traditions of our species have engendered ethical barometers by which we can see and feel the urgings of the

biosphere and re-calibrate our intuitive tuning forks. Each one of us must act presidentially in this endeavor.

3). What human cultures have developed such bio-diverse ethical values?

MT: Every culture has nurtured the seeds of ethical realism. But these ethics have been challenged like never before given the nature of globalism and the pressing evidence of interdependency amongst all economics and ecosystems. **One of the most discrete but valuable examples of ethical sustainability are those manifested by the Jain traditions, namely, ahimsa, or non-violence.** This more than any other credo enshrines the inexhaustible notion of unconditional love and applies it to everyday activities we humans are engaged in: at the dinner table, at our jobs, in our voting, spending of money, consumption and by each interaction with every individual of all other species. Jain monks exemplify the very zenith of these ethical injunctions and **I would urge readers to become familiar with Jain traditions**, thoroughly acquainting their selves with the breathtaking, if challenging approaches to lifestyle and restraint that Jains have practiced and taught their own children and grandchildren for thousands of years. One of their basic tenets is vegetarianism. Today, given our realization of the dairy industry and the methane produced from the mouths of bovines - an emission more demonstrable and injurious than CO₂ - not to mention the suffering caused to the animals themselves - a vegan diet is imperative. Many Jains are moving from vegetarianism to veganism. The rest of humanity would be well advised to do so.

4) How can a human leader remain humble in spite of his/her power and influence?

MT: Both Winston Churchill and Mikhail Gorbachev accomplished some of the most remarkable political feats of the 20th century, for the good of humanity. Yet, both men were soon "forgotten" by the vast majority of people, particularly the young, many of whom, if asked, would have no idea who they were or what they achieved. Our leaders, like Queen Elizabeth I, or Queen Victoria, or Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, or Ashoka, Gandhi, Mahavira, Buddha, Christ, Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa have each responded to their tumultuous times according to mandates of the heart and soul that required placing the happiness of others before the happiness of oneself, a Jain ethic to the core. Humility is ingrained by this quiet and infectious pathway towards inner and outer peace. **If the mind is polluted, says the "mother of Japanese civilization", the great 9th century Japanese monk, poet Kobo Daishi (Kukai), then the world will be polluted.** If the mind is clear, patient, loving, so the world will be. I believe any great leader leads by listening, leads by example, leads by respect and tolerance for others, but is also capable of inspiring others to be the best they can. That is true power, true influence. When Gandhi was asked by a mother how to wean her child off his addiction to sugar, he is said to have told her, come back in two weeks and I will have an answer for you. When she made the long trek back with her child two weeks later to seek Babu's advice, he told her that when she had first come to him, he, too, had been addicted to sugar. Therefore, it took him two weeks to wean himself off of it and he was not about to advise the child against sugar until he himself had been liberated from his own addiction. That was the precursor to Gandhi's famed statement, **Be the Change you wish to enact in the world.**

5) Nature does not communicate in a human language, but your work pleads for us to hear its voice. How can we tune in to nature's wisdom?

MT: I do not understand most human languages in the world, such as Chinese or Arabic, Icelandic or Hungarian. But that has not stopped me from making close friends with speakers of these languages, or traveling to those regions where children are fluent in Arabic or Icelandic, or whatever language, whereas I am lucky to be able to say "Hello" and "Thank you." This business of tuning in is no more difficult than that: go there. **Familiarity, as biologist E.O. Wilson reminds us, breeds love, not contempt.**

6) In my own teachings on diversity and equality, conveying the respect for biodiversity and making this the starting point for thinking about equality (instead of the usual obsession with respecting humans at the expense of everything else), is very hard indeed. People simply cannot grasp it, or do not know what to do with this concept. I would appreciate any suggestions you may have?

MT: Biophilia is a term that has been in use for decades to describe the natural affiliation that most species feel about each other. Other terms - mutualism, symbiosis, cooperation - all speak to the same great and lasting truth about the world: the intertwined lives that must learn not only to live side by side, but to break the presumed barriers that exist between creatures. When we say a dog is a man's best friend, we might just as well say a pigeon is a man's best friend; a dove and a wolf were Saint Francis' best friends, a lamb is not merely a lamb, but the lamb of God. In fact, the minute you begin to listen and look at nature it is, as John Muir described the avalanche of epiphanies, like reading an open book, or a heretofore unopened telegram sent of its own accord from the depths of the Earth. **We are a new species, a good species, but if we do not learn the language of seagulls, of tropical rainforests, of oceans and rivers, mountains and mangroves, we are likely to have an epitaph that reads of the shortest-lived species in history.** Many people remember the exquisite picture in the wake of the tragic Tsunami that took so many hundreds of thousands of human lives, and probably millions of other animal and plant lives; namely, of a young hippo and a young turtle on the coast of Somalia, shipwrecked creatures from different universes who bonded, became closest companions. Or of the polar bear playing with the huskies. Or of the lion, raised by two gentlemen in London, subsequently returned to the wilds in Africa as an adult and then, many years later, recognizing the two chaps who came to pay a visit, only to be **smothered with kisses** by the lion that stepped forth from the wild to greet them. As happened in the classic film, "Born Free". One of the most remarkable such examples recently popped up on the Internet, namely, that of a young man who found 2 grizzly cubs with a dead mother in Alaska. He raised one of the surviving cubs, and the **pictures** tell it all.

Michael Tobias' latest book with Jane Morrison, [Sanctuary](#), is a beautiful coffee table appeal for preservation, saluting the exceptional work of the people who try to protect the wilderness. He is also President of the [Dancing Star Foundation](#).

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