

What Defines us?  
November 13, 2011

There are eight million objects on display at the British Museum in London. One can never hope to absorb it all, nor even a portion. The exception being, however, when 100 curators took four years to go through every artifact to come up with just 100 prominent objects that best describe the human story through history. This audacious project was completed last year, with the hidden agenda not just to display key artifacts, turning points in history, but showcasing a mere 100 objects in the vast collection that best define who we are.

The oldest artifact is a two million year old chopping tool made from stone found in Tanzania. The curators refer to it as the beginning of the toolbox. My personal toolbox at home never really advanced beyond a stone-chopping tool..., which I guess defines me to a certain extent.

One of the more surprising objects of the collection includes a David Hockney 1966 etching of two men lying in bed side by side. The curators maintain that etching defines our human uncertainties about what society finds acceptable or unacceptable, the limits of tolerance, individual freedom, and shifting moral structures. In essence we are defined by perplexing questions about right and wrong behavior, a significant factor in the shaping of human history.

Apparently the curators received a lot of unsolicited advice about which objects define us in today's world, ranging from iPads to Botox needles. But the final object selected was a plastic, solar-powered light about the size of a coffee mug that came with a charger and cost \$45. The curators explained it this way: "It can illuminate an entire room, enough to change the lives of a family with no electricity. It is a transformative object, one that sets people free. Once they have access to solar power, they have access to the Internet, then they have access to the world of knowledge."

Aside from my fascination about the goal of the project and the process, I got to thinking more broadly about what defines us. There's definitely a kernel of truth that the objects chosen to represent humankind over the course of two million years reveal much about what makes us tick. Many of the objects chosen embodied some intriguing tales of politics, power, social history, and human behavior through many a millennia. But I somehow feel we are more than simply the sum of the objects displayed.

An alternative, of course to discovering how the core of our being might be defined leads to examining the research relating to the human genome. This reveals the human interior structure basically shared across the evolutionary tree. We can count microbes and human cells and determine how that all interacts with our DNA, which contributes to our individual and species identity. However, I am not satisfied

in my search for what defines us in learning that the boundary between us and chimpanzees is very slim. (I don't find that particularly helpful). Nor is my thirst quenched when I discover that the DNA of the Neanderthal man remains inside me still today. Although I know many guys including myself who have been labeled Neanderthal in the course of our lives, I feel I am not defined as such...any more.

Recently a good friend, 70-years old, retired. He is bright and articulate with a brilliant career behind him in innovative technology. He consulted for Microsoft up until recently. Now he's retired, away from the center of his passion, lives in a lovely home along the Columbia River Gorge, but has fallen into depression. He claims he can no longer define who he is; his life has lost all relevancy. He raised the question if our work or perhaps even just our passions define us. That which makes us feel relevant to the ongoing conversation in our respective fields of interest defines us. I know that for many of us that rings a certain truth. After all, how many conversations begin with: "What do you do?" You might as well ask: Who are you, and the response will most likely be an accounting of the kind of work in which you are engaged. If you are not working, then who are you?

I've been reading with interest about Steve Jobs, who was trained in Zen Buddhism. If I infer correctly, I think Jobs would credit experiential wisdom over empirical analysis as a life-shaping influence. Jobs would probably contend that what defined us is made up more of intuitive powers than rational thought. After dropping out of college and wandering around India, he learned the power of imagination and how to apply it.

He is compared at times with Albert Einstein, both for his level of genius and for his emphasis on Imagination over knowledge. Imagination is that which allows us to think differently and thus defines who we are. Although Einstein was not religious, he described his intuitive genius as "the ability to read God's mind." When assessing a theory he would ask himself: "Is this the way God would design the universe?" By the way, the Nobel Laureate physicist Niels Bohr (famously) urged Einstein to quit telling God what to do.

It took eighteen hours following Steve Job's death, before the negative postings appeared like the one: "Steve Jobs was not God." This was kinder than the posting: "Steve Jobs was a Jerk." The backlash against Jobs took him from divine to demonic in a heartbeat. It was a short Sainthood for Steve Jobs.

But then quite the opposite happened to Kurt Vonnegut. Before he died four years ago, he told his biographer that his reputation had plummeted and that the only way to regain credit for his earlier works from the 50's and 60's which college kids loved, would be to die. So I guess the question is if we are defined by our lives, like Steve Jobs, or somehow defined in death like Kurt Vonnegut. I find neither a satisfactory way to get to the heart of the question.

To put it simply, I think the question: what defines us has less to do with artifacts, our work, our DNA, our imagination, life and death...and deals more with some basic theological tenets.

Wendell Berry frequently alludes to our “insatiable desire for more.” It drives us; it drives the world. It stems, he says, from our sense of incompleteness. An interesting correlation: we strive for more because we feel incomplete. For me, this assessment with which I basically agree, serves as a barometer of what defines us: we are defined by how we choose to fill this gnawing sense of incompleteness. This leads to an appraisal of whether we fill our lives with superficialities or with substance. The choices are obviously ours to make, but is how we fill our lives an indicator of that which defines who we are? Do we fill our lives for the purpose of our own gratification, or do we feel more “complete” when we fill our lives with awareness of others with whom we share this earth, and concern for earth itself. Occupy Salt Lake City makes this distinction quite obvious.

Another way of asking the question: Do we fill our incompleteness with “stuff” or with meaning? We would then be defined by what WE perceive as meaningful.

Quite honestly I wonder if that is really the answer to what defines us, primarily because (I think we would all agree): meaning lies beyond definition. I remember a colleague of mine who preached on the meaning of life. He was asked to leave within a month of that sermon not because it was a “bad” sermon per se, but came across as muddled incoherence. You can’t capture life’s meaning and put it in a box and say, “there it is.” So if we’re defined by something that lies beyond definition, then we’re spinning our wheels, which may in fact be precisely what we’re doing.

May I interject at this point that I believe the purpose of religion, even for us liberal types or perhaps especially for us liberal types...the purpose of religion is to gather confidence that meaning at least exists, even if we can’t wrap our arms around it. I think religion asks of us to trust that meaning not only exists somewhere over the rainbow, but that it fuels our optimism, allows us to put one foot in front of another, pick ourselves up when we stumble, and contributes to a certain vitality in human life itself.

As I consider more fully what defines us, I move away from objects, biology, and the grandiosity of thinking we can grasp life’s meaning. What gains considerable traction in my effort to tackle this loaded question is that I believe we are defined by love. Try not to throw-up. Let me make this clearer.

A most basic theological concept, either using God or not – it doesn’t matter in this case...but a basic concept in the theological world is that there are two modes of existing: one in the form of power, and the other in the form of love. In more familiar jargon, the two modes break down as people either “taking” or people “giving”... that is, people capitalizing on the missteps of others or people forgiving others their trespasses. A lack of love relates to destruction; a life of love relates to creation. How

people relate to wilderness, for example, shows what I'm driving at. (Power-love; destruction-creation).

Our lives driven by power with the need to take and accumulate for ourselves is mostly motivated by fear. We are afraid that we will not fill our incompleteness with the treasures we cherish. We wait to strike at the vulnerable times of others so we can get the right job or promotion, the right pre-k or college, or even the man or woman we hope to marry. We live in a "taking" world.

Love – to live in the mode of love – means living with the acceptance of our human condition, which proclaims that nobody has power over anyone else. Love, which we identify as being tender, is tender only because it transcends the mode of taking. "The hands of love," according to Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen, "the hands of love don't take, grasp, or hold. They caress."

What a powerful image when trying to understand what defines us: Do we live in love and caress the world and others, or do we grasp, hold, and take? In a New Testament chapter of 1John, reference is made to God as love and the light. But even leaving the deity out of the picture, the author says "if we live our lives in the light we are in union with one another." Does this not say a lot about what defines us: We live tenderly in union with others or we are filling our incompleteness by taking from the other.

Thomas Merton makes clear that love is not something that happens to you; it's a certain way of being alive. It's an intensification of life and what's more, it offers a sense of fullness. So imagine what it might mean to fill this sense of incompleteness with love. Do we think we came into this world to "take" or to live in communion with others?

Let me share with you one of the more beautiful words on this topic, written by a scientist no less, Stephan J. Gould: "we cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well – for we will not fight to save what we do not love."

I take this to mean that our lives are defined by what we love, and if we are in love with the environment, for example, then we live our lives accordingly. Without love, the environment is there for us to take for ourselves. The hands grasp. Stephan J. Gould, I believe, refers to hands caressing...caressing flowers and habitats and the people we love.

According to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, love is the law of life. When the law is broken, consequences are felt. Is that not precisely what we're feeling today: our depression about political and social and economic proclivities is a manifestation that we feel the law of love has been broken. We are swept up in a display of economic power and taking and grabbing which rejects ever living in the light of union with one another.

Myriad approaches exist to what we believe defines us. Perhaps if I were a scientist or a museum curator I would not be so aligned with the theological. But I find love, or the absence of love, a key variable to what defines me. Love represents a connection with the rest of life. Indeed, I will only fight to save what I love...that to which I feel connected. This is not an indictment, but an affirmation.

If we agree with the premise that we have an insatiable desire for more – that as humans we can suppose an innate sense of incompleteness – then are we not defined by the extent to which love fills our completeness? We are defined by our relationship to other people, to nature, to all sentient beings. Are we motivated by power or by love...by taking or by giving...by destruction or creation?

We are not defined by the jobs we have, the hobbies we keep, nor the jokes we tell. I don't think we're defined by our toolbox, by what we paint, nor our DNA. We're defined by our approach to the world...by hands that either take or hands that caress.