

# Alison Hawthorne Deming

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an excerpt of

## *Culture, Biology, and Emergence*

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Before Henry David Thoreau began his twenty-eight-mile walk along the Cape Cod seashore in October 1849, he stopped to witness a shipwreck at Cohasset. “Death!” read the headlines in Boston, “One Hundred and Forty-Five Lives Lost.” Thoreau traveled among the many Irish, hundreds of them going to identify bodies, comfort the survivors, and attend funerals. “Many horses in carriages were fastened to the fences near the shore,” he wrote, “and, for a mile or more, up and down, the beach was covered with people looking out for bodies and examining fragments of the wreck.” The brig *St. John*, loaded with emigrants from Galway, Ireland, had broken on the rocks that Sunday morning, and the atmosphere was not of grief but of “a sober despatch of business” as coffins were filled, nailed shut, and carted away. Among the crowd picking through the wreckage were men collecting seaweed the storm had cast up, carrying it above the reach of the tide, after separating out fragments of clothing. The horror of turning up a human body in the wrack did not keep them from gathering the “valuable manure” of seaweed. “This shipwreck,” Thoreau observed, “had not produced a visible vibration in the fabric of society.”

He was not numb to the loss and misery of the wreck, but he admired the social whole and its ongoing pragmatism. He felt that the seashore acquired “a rarer and sublimer beauty” when framed by this event. He admired the industry of the fishermen, farther along on his journey, counting two hundred mackerel boats working offshore near Truro, another hundred on the horizon floating on this “highway of nations,” and overall an astonishing 1,500 fishing rigs working out of Provincetown in the mid-1800s. Today one might see a handful, and those nearly always lashed bow and stern and spring lines to the

wharf. Thoreau depicts the place with an eye to history, an ear to local story, and an implicit confidence in human enterprise.

Reading this account of his travels, I don't see him as recluse, Luddite, and misanthrope—the pacifist Unabomber of the nineteenth century—as those who grow cynical about human prospects might come to imagine. He is a man who seeks solitude in order to live deliberately and to pass the lesson on to others, a man who commits civil disobedience to goad injustice and advance moral philosophy, and a man who appreciates human thrift and industry.

Thoreau's *Cape Cod* makes a good complement to *Walden*, which grates on me for some of its stridencies, particularly Thoreau's ridicule of technology as "pretty toys" that "distract our attention from serious things." This strikes me as snobbish intellectualism, as opposed to the work's more dominant note of mindful curiosity. What has been more serious to human beings than technology since the first flint struck sparks? Maybe art. Maybe religion. This is the kind of animal we are: tool-making, art-making, symbol-making, and intensely social, engaged in a mutually reinforcing set of activities that make us speed-learners and obsessive connectors with one another. Technology may be sinking us now, but this need not be the case. The question is not whether we can live without technology, but whether we can live with technology in such a way that we do not destroy ourselves and the planet.

The communication and information technologies, in particular, strike me as markers of an emerging shift in consciousness. What kind of good thing might they be? What might be the adaptive aspects to this cultural movement? A form of collective intelligence that no one controls, it evolves in its own organismic way to egg us on toward greater connection, exposure, accountability, and collaboration. Sure, the Internet is full of trash and hype, but the freedom with which information can move makes censorship, deception, and totalitarianism much harder to inflict.

Scott Russell Sanders' "Simplicity and Sanity" makes an eloquent case for simplicity and the role of individual responsibility in facing the crisis of global climate change. I try to follow the principles he offers, taking pragmatic steps to reduce my weight on the planet. But the problems we face are of such profound scope that they cannot be effectively addressed by individual responses alone. The ultimate responsibility for reducing the effects of global climate change is a collective social responsibility that requires policy, regulation, alliance, and law—instruments our culture has failed to provide. I say "culture," not "government," because democratic government is, in theory, an instrument for

realizing the will of the people. We do no good by acting as if we-the-people are virtuous while they-the-government are corrupt. The fabric of human culture is being frayed, stretched, and torn by our predicament. Values rule that none of us really believe in: profit trumps all, every man for himself, wealth is health, and—this is author William DeBuys’ coinage at a recent symposium—“yoyo”: you’re on your own.

Not surprisingly, I am at odds with my culture. So many of us are these days, as we free-fall into ecological doom. Recycling, installing halogen bulbs, and writing letters to Congress seem pallid levels of activism when compared to the severity of our collective malaise. We live in a pathological culture that is sick with violence, greed, waste, contentiousness, and a sense of futility. We live in cities we despise for their ugliness, menace, and lack of community (though it’s puritanical, I know, at such moments as this to deny the pleasures of the city). We have poor people whom we ignore, leaving them stranded on their roofs in a flood or cast out on the street. We ask their children to die in senseless wars. We have elected leaders who have no business leading, so lacking are they in wisdom and the capacity for reflective thought and empathy; their disdain for learning and scientific research, and their absurdly simplistic posturing about the state of religion in a pluralistic democracy, would make such leaders laughable if their actions were not causing so much anguish around the world and so much erosion of our sense of purpose at home.

No greater proof of our dissident relationship to our own culture is needed than the terrible moment we parents meet when we send our children to school, camp, movies, or a sleepover at a neighbor’s house. We feel them slip from the embrace of family and plunge into the turbulence of society. We realize we cannot control the influences that will enter their minds and hearts. We feel sick with fear.

Raising me in the 1950s, my artistic parents wanted to protect me from the conformity of Connecticut’s suburban somnolence. Raising my daughter in the culturally contentious sixties, I wanted to protect her from rednecks and the evangelical neighbors who said that her dreams of a beloved dead grandmother were visits from Satan. My grown daughter and her husband—a visual artist and a progressive pastor—struggle to raise their boys without taint of the violence, excess, and greed that surround them. We all come to the horrible awareness that we cannot protect our children from the culture in which they live. We do not trust it; we do not want to feel that we are part of it. Yet our children, too, will become creatures of their culture and their histori-

cal moment. They will have to learn for themselves what their values are, but we want desperately to *give* them their values, as surely as we gave them their names.

This alienation from and resistance to culture only serves to reinforce the value of bullish individualism, but no matter how much we do as individuals, the larger organism of culture remains impoverished. The old place-based cultures no longer work. John Donne wrote that no man is an island; now we know that no culture is an island, that to be alive cultures must be permeable. This lesson is one that First Nation peoples of the Americas have had to learn through the hardest of lessons. Today, war based upon conflicting fundamentalisms breaks out when people are unable to acknowledge and live with the permeability of culture. Yet the velocity of change is such that we do not know what verities to rely upon. What ideas about culture can we take up in good faith as part of our tool kit for rebuilding the “commons”—those aspects of nature and culture that cannot be owned—as a countervailing force to the market? What ideas about culture might help us to celebrate rather than bemoan the social whole of which we are a part?