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MIND, BODY & SOUL Part VI: Innovation, Technology and Changing the World

What Does it Mean to be Human?

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Jane Goodall, PhD, DBE:

When I went out to study chimpanzees, I hadn't been to college, I was just an animal lover from childhood. And Dr. Louis Leakey sent me out, and very soon I discovered so many similarities between the chimpanzees and ourselves in many areas. I was absolutely shocked when two years later I got to Cambridge University in the UK and was told the difference between us and other animals is one of kind. That was in the early '60s. I was told I couldn't talk about chimpanzee personality, mind, or emotion, because those were qualities unique to us. Fortunately, I learned that that was wrong from my dog when I was a child, and I was able to stand up to the professors. I think it's just because chimpanzees are so like us, that we can stand back and say, "Yes, they are so like us, but we are different," and ask ourselves what that difference is.

I think where we fit in into the picture of primates is we are the fifth great ape, and our closest relative among the other great apes... Well, there's two of them, actually, the chimpanzee and the bonobo. We differ from each other genetically by only just over 1%. So that puts us very clearly into, biologically, amongst the other great apes. But then I ended off the beginning by saying, "You can step back then and say, 'Yes, but we're different.'" A lot of this has been said already. I mean, chimpanzees can be taught sign language. They can learn to use a computer. From this, we've been able to tell something about the way their minds work, but even the brightest chimpanzee, and some of them can learn up to 600 signs and communicate with each other as well as their teacher, they can paint, and they'll tell you what they've painted, And it's interesting to see how their minds differ though.

One chimpanzee, four years old, loved to make drawings. She'd been taught sign language, and she was asked to do a drawing. She usually filled up the page with circles, and on this occasion, she just drew like that and handed the paper back. So her teacher said, "Please finish," and the chimpanzee looked at it and handed it back and signed "Finished." So the teacher then said, "What is it?" And the chimpanzee signed back, "Ball, a ball." What has she done? She's drawn the bounce of a ball, and that to me is absolutely a fascinating glimpse into their minds. But during our evolution, we learned a language which enabled us

to communicate with words. Although chimpanzees can be taught words, they haven't developed that ability. They communicate with rich variety of postures and gestures, which we use too, we share those ways of communication. But this sudden development of the use of words, it enables us to teach children about things that aren't present, and it enables us to make plans for the distant future.

Chimpanzees can plan, "Let's go hunting now." They look at each other, they touch each other, and they set off on the hunt. But we can sit down and make a plan for 10 years' time. With the use of words and language, we developed writing. And I think this triggered this explosive development of the intellect, which has led to our ability to do all these things that was talked about earlier to develop telescopes and binoculars, to develop rockets that go up to Mars from which a little robot crawls to take photos of the Red Planet, the surface of the Red Planet.

But then when you realize how like us chimpanzees are, and yet how we differ with this explosive development of the intellect, this development of the intellect has not given us a reason to label ourselves as Homo sapiens, the wise ape. We're not wise. We've seen what Mars looks like. We don't want to live there. We've only got this one planet, at least in our lifetimes, and we're destroying it. So it's an extraordinary difference that we've become extremely intellectual, and we've lost the wisdom of living in our environment in a sustainable way. All the major religions share the golden rule, do to others as you would have them do to you. If we can apply that to animals, as well as to each other, then I think we shall be coming closer to being able to define ourselves as Homo sapiens.