

Human Values in an Age of Change

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A winner of many international literary awards, including the prestigious Booker Prize, MARGARET ATWOOD is the author of more than forty volumes of poetry, children's literature, fiction, and nonfiction. She is perhaps best known for her novels, which include *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*. Her nonfiction book *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, part of the Massey Lecture series, was made into a documentary. Her recent novel, *Madaddam* (the third novel in the Oryx and Crake trilogy), has received rave reviews: "An extraordinary achievement" (the *Independent*); "A fitting and joyous conclusion" (the *New York Times*). The trilogy is being adapted into an HBO TV series by celebrated filmmaker Darren Aronofsky. Atwood's most recent collection of short stories is *Stone Mattress*. Her new novel, *The Heart Goes Last*, was published in September 2015 by Random House.

Atwood's work has been published in more than forty languages, including Farsi, Japanese, Turkish, Finnish, Korean, Icelandic, and Estonian. In 2004, she coined the LongPen, a remote signing device that allows someone to write in ink anywhere in the world via tablet PC and the Internet. She is also a popular personality on Twitter, with over 750,000 followers.

Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa and grew up in northern Ontario, Quebec, and Toronto. She received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and her master's degree from Radcliffe College.

I am very honored to be here with you today. It is gratifying that you think I could have something to say that might be, marginally, at least, worth hearing. The topic I was asked to speak about is, however, somewhat daunting—"Human Values in an Age of Change." Yikes, as those of my generation used to say. Given the choice between "My Summer Vacation" and "Human Values in an Age of Change" as a high school essay topic, I would have beelined for the summer vacation, snore-making as it would have been, since I certainly would not have written about what I really did on my summer vacation, such as writing stories in the mode of Edgar Allan Poe. But "Human Values in an Age of Change" would have been way too ambitious for me.

I knew what an age of change was—we had just invented the hula hoop, plus Fire and Ice lipstick and oat cereal with holes in it—but human values? What were those? And were they the same as humane values, such as "Don't kick your dog?" I suspected not. For every human value has its evil twin. Such is our fate.

I was already well into the reading of science fiction, and the possibility of beings that shared some human functions but were not human was something that troubled my waking dreams. H. G. Wells's tentacled Martians that relished the drinking of human blood through straws, sort of like a soda, were definitely not human; but what about Ray Bradbury's Martians, or John Wyndham's Chrysalids? Or the thinking, feeling robots of Karl Capek's *R.U.R.*? What about Donovan's Brain, that lived in a glass aquarium full of brain food and had brain superpowers, and was intent on manipulating the stock market? What—in other words—are the essential human characteristics, without which we cease to be us? Now that we have opened Pandora's Box, which is the ability to change the human genome and thus alter our own descendants, it seems even more pertinent to ask that question.

I have been recently reprimanded, by the way, for having said that science fiction (as opposed to speculative fiction, which takes place on this planet, with scenarios that are possible now, involving our own species, *Homo sapiens*)—proper involves things that are not possible and that take place in a galaxy far, far away and in another time, such as talking squids in outer space. It was thought that I was sneering upon these loquacious squids. But such—I protest!—was not at all my intention. What, I ask you, is *wrong* with talking squids in outer space? I for one will be very cross if it is ever proved definitely that outer space contains no talking squids. There are many water planets, and if they harbor

life, such life would therefore have to be aquatic; and squids are not unintelligent.

Maybe I should have said “talking octopi,” as octopi are very clever indeed. They can take the lids off jars, which is a darn sight more than I can sometimes do these days. A talking squid (or octopus) in outer space is as good a point of departure as any for a consideration of essential human characteristics. This ultra-squid (or octopus) would not talk in the same way that we do, lacking the necessary vocal apparatus, but the possibilities for semaphoric communication are quite good. One tentacle *Yes*, two tentacles *No*, three tentacles *Make that a fish latte*, four tentacles, *Would you like some octopoid sex?* Eight tentacles, *My octopus army with its powerful suckers is now going to rip your puny spaceship to shreds*. The essentials of what needs to be said, as you will immediately recognize. Consensus, nourishment, procreation, and defense. Somebody tell Congress. Better still, elect an octopus. But I digress.

That would be one way of approaching “Human Values in an Age of Change”—via the talking cephalopods. But there are many other ways; because the title is a bit one-size-fits-all generic. In fact it sounds a little like an ad for life insurance, for example: Shot of a granddad playing with the grandkids, with some old-timey music in the background. “Granddad, did you have a photo album when you were young?” “Yes, honey, but it was made of paper.” “Paper? What’s that? MY photo album is in the Cloud!” “What’s the Cloud, honey?” “The Cloud is on my iPad! And you’ll always be in my photo album in the Cloud, Granddad!” Indicating that lifestyles we are comfortable recognizing at present will be passed down to the next generations, despite rapid increases in confusing technology, even if granddad croaks. But especially if Granddad, before croaking, has taken out a hefty policy to insure that his descendants can pay their monthly Wi-Fi bills.

Granddad, being no fool despite the fact that he may not immediately know what LMAO means, has conspired with a bunch of other granddads and grandmoms, or maybe just a bunch of dads and moms, or maybe just a bunch of people over the age of thirty, to invite me here to speak to you today. These wise folks suspect I have a foot in both camps—the human values camp, problematic though the notion of an essentialist quality called *human* is rapidly becoming, as increasingly sophisticated androids and biotech baby-designing possibilities hit the radar; and the age of change camp, with its dizzying discoveries and inventions and society-changing technologies and fears of planetary catastrophe.

I can indeed speak to both camps, being one of the few white-haired people on the planet who knows what ROTFL means, thanks to the young people on my Twitter, who obligingly answer questions such as “Is *bad-ass* a good thing or a bad thing?” when I ask them. So thanks, kids. I have learned a lot from you. And thanks, more elderly inviters, whoever you may be. And let’s hope I can get through “Human Values in an Age of Change” without having a heart attack and toppling off the podium.

That perked you up! OMG, you may have thought: could she really? An action moment! How awful! How thrilling!

I have just demonstrated one of the first principles of narrative art, which is: introduce uncertainty. Otherwise known as “suspense.” Alfred Hitchcock, when asked how long he could have his actors hold a kiss on-screen, said “Two minutes.” “Isn’t that awfully long?” they asked. “Yes,” he replied, “but first I put a bomb under the bed.” You have to admit that at my mention of a possible disaster happening to myself, right before your very eyes, you popped awake. Or at least a little more awake than you were before.

Narrative art belongs to one of the essential human-value clusters, by the way. All societies that we know anything about tell stories, and have a group of core stories that they prize above others. Anthropologists have gone about collecting areas of interest and accomplishment that appear to be shared by all human societies we know anything about; these include complex languages, probably our oldest and most powerful technology; symbolic thinking and representation, also very old; singing and music; the visual arts, including body and clothing decoration; food and cooking; the ability to count (but not trigonometry; that’s new); dwelling places; children and procreation, gender, and sex; heating and light, or energy sources; toolmaking; beliefs and practices concerning animals; origin stories and religious observances; exchanges, including trading and justice (good for good, bad for bad); and an interest in what happens to people after they die.

Those are some shared human interests. Then there are the values attached to segments of them. The values themselves come in two parts: what we think we ought to do, and what we actually do—by no means always the same. We in this culture hold up monogamy as a virtue. I leave you to imagine how often that value, though respected on the surface, is not practiced in fact.

The details of the values can change from culture to culture (a tassel here, a piece of jade there, a taboo against eating turtles over there, a head

covering on the other side, some blue tattoos to the north), but the areas of interest are shared.

How could it be otherwise? What interests us relates to what kind of creature we are. Our interests and our values are inextricably tied to that, and all our stories and all our arts and technologies are utterings (or out-erings) of those interests and values. We never make art or invent new tech that is not an expression of a human wish and our desire to fulfill it, or a human fear and the desire to protect ourselves from it.

Put another way: If we were super-intelligent spiders with the ability to invent and manufacture technologies, including biotechnologies, we would be focused on the development of large, juicy, domesticated flies, and of bottled fly juice, and of super-filament web-enhancers. For male spiders, we would be inventing little suits that would render the male spider invisible and intangible so he could creep up on the female and impregnate her without getting eaten.

If, on the other hand, we were super-intelligent ravens, we would be inventing little Swiss army knives that would allow us to open dead carcasses so we would not have to depend on wolves, polar bears, or people to do it for us.

But instead we are a eusocial species of hominids, “eusocial” meaning a species that raises its young over generations, in a nest or fixed location that is therefore defended by more than just a parent or parents caring for offspring, thus forming a society with differentiated roles. We share this quality with ants and bees, and with naked mole rats. Though some would say we are not altruistic enough to be truly eusocial. The jury is out. Still, it would explain some of the things we do on a regular and sometimes deplorable basis.

Take war.

If you were one of those children who poked anthills with a stick, you will know that there is a set of ant values or imperatives. “Defend the nest” is foremost among these. In ants, that means: (1) when poked with a stick, hide the kids, otherwise known as eggs and larvae; and (2) swarm all over the intruding foot and up the pant leg if available, and bite for all you’re worth. In people, who are symbolic thinkers—with the good things and the bad things that come with being a symbolic thinker—the “nest” can be your own home and family. Or it can be your car, thus accounting for road rage. Or it can be your town, your state, your country, your ethnic group, your religion, your favorite band, or your football team. We have all felt the anger that happens when our nest is attacked,

in any of its manifestations. In its most problematic incarnation it leads to wars, among people as among ants. Some wars are wars of acquisition (make the nest bigger by invading another's territory and taking their stuff); and some are wars of resistance (keep the others from invading your territory and taking your stuff.) But all wars are group efforts having to do with territory, and with a division of labor.

"Defend the nest," among people as among ants, also manifests itself as that old slogan of the Three Musketeers, "All for one and one for all." At its best, this can appear as acts of pure altruism—soldiers who throw themselves on grenades to save their comrades, people who jump into freezing water to rescue strangers, or those who take a public moral stand in the face of repressive laws or governments and get themselves jailed or shot for doing it. Odd though it may seem in a society that does not value the arts as highly as it values, say, making a lot of money, artists are usually in the front lines when it comes to being shot, because dictators and authoritarian governments know the power of art. That is one way of celebrating the humanities, though not a way we would like to see put into practice here.

At its worst, "defend the nest" can appear as mob rule, witch burning, riots, and the like.

That is one example of a human interest with positive and negative values stemming from it. But let's turn to something closer to my heart, which is that body of story-telling practices (on whatever diverse platforms) that we might call the narrative arts.



Why do people everywhere, in all cultures, tell stories?

Our ancestors spent a very long time in the Paleolithic Period before written languages appeared, so "history" as we know it is just a thin skin of icing on an otherwise very large and somewhat impenetrable cake. What our predecessors were doing during all those years, as the ice ages came and went—in addition to meeting the basic needs for food and shelter—must have included a great deal of what we would now call *the arts* and *religion* and *the humanities*, though it was not until very recent times that we began to call them by those separating names, and to specialize in them. Those ancient ones were also working out various forms of what we would now call *science*, or at least *applied science*—this mushroom will kill you; here is how you make a chert arrowhead, and so forth.

Thus the deep roots of what we now call *the humanities* are very, very old. There is a bone flute dated to forty thousand years ago on which you

can play Mozart. There is a shell with a homo-erectus-made design on it that carbon-dates to four hundred thousand years. These kinds of art-making behaviors must have contributed enough to the enterprise at hand—the survival and flourishing of the group—that they were selected for, though we can only guess at the uses made of the various forms of art. We do know that extremely young children soak up languages like little sponges, that they show an interest in music and dance—melody and rhythm—very early, that they are inclined to use visual tools, such as crayons on the wallpaper, well before they have enough small-motor control to make recognizable pictures, and that they can understand a narrative sequence—a story—this happens, then this, then this—before they can talk.

We cannot truly know, but it is tempting to think that both musical systems and articulated languages—containing, for instance, a past tense and a future tense, and the ability to create similes and metaphors—are our oldest human technologies. Music fosters bonding, and helps members of communities to feel and act together. (Hint: that's what hymns are for, not to mention march music and national anthems.) Narrative skills would have been invaluable in many ways: for origin stories—*here's where we came from*—but especially for helping the young survive and prosper by way of story, a far more effective way of communicating than, for instance, graphs and charts, say those who study such things.

This is the story about how Uncle Drood got eaten by a crocodile because he went swimming *right there*. Do not do the same! On the other hand, here is how we hunted the gazelles last year; if you listen to the story about it, you will be better equipped to hunt gazelles yourself, when the time comes.

It has recently been proposed by the brain people that the processes involved in memory did not evolve to help us remember the past, but instead to help us anticipate the future—thus a function with an obvious survival application. Another positive result of the narrative arts—novels included—is increased empathy, or *feeling with*. Empathy enlarges our ability to understand other people, we are told; a valuable life skill if you are a member of a small interdependent group, as most people were until very recently. And useful even today, unless you want to interact with nothing but the Siri voice on your phone. “Siri,” we asked her recently. “Does cat urine cause dementia?” “I am trying to understand your request,” she replied.

But you did not need higher math to survive or flourish in a small Paleolithic group. The number of objects we can count by looking at

them assembled on a tabletop, without using fingers or an abacus, is seven, we are told. Although we can learn arithmetic and algebra if we apply ourselves, we are not soaking them up at the age of two. And they were very late to appear in human history. It isn't that we couldn't count. We just needed some tech help doing it. Most of the Mesopotamian clay tablets written in cuneiform are temple inventories. Only a few are poems, such as *Gilgamesh* and the Sumerian Inanna hymn cycle. Why? People could easily memorize the poems, but not the numbering inventories.

So we come into this world equipped with nascent capabilities for "the arts." Inside every one of us is an artist of some sort. (Maybe not a very good artist. But an artist nonetheless.) You can take the humanities out of the curriculum, but you can't take the humanities out of the humans. They are built in.



People are in the habit of making a distinction between the sciences on the one hand, and the humanities on the other—though both are part and parcel of who we are. But each understands basic questions differently. For instance: *Who are we?*

Science can only speak authoritatively about what can be measured, and about hypotheses that can be proven by repeatable experiments. So from the scientists you will get a lot of fascinating stuff—we are a DNA pattern closely related to, but differing crucially from, those of the other primates; we are a carbon-based air-breathing life form reducible to a few pounds of minerals and a lot of H₂O; we are composed, in part, of many nonhuman but symbiotic intestinal and cellular nanobioforms, without which we would die. Science can tell us *what* we are, but who we are may well be a different sort of question. Not everything about us is the sum of our material parts, or so I fondly believe. But those who think they can ignore those material parts altogether are sadly deluded.

And, if you ask the anthropologists and archaeologists the same question—*who are we*—they will say we all exist in a culture, like other social animals, and in our case that ever-fluctuating cultural matrix is composed of a huge number of waxing and waning memes that carry various emotional charges, including modern meme clusters like "Elvis Presley" and ancient ones like "Easter egg," and almost forgotten but once potent ones like "bubble gum," and very modern ones like "Twitter."

If you ask the theologians, you will get yet another set of answers, which I trust will contain the phrase "a living soul," or something like it. This will start a furious argument with the natural scientists, who will

insist that the soul be produced so it can be weighed and measured, and the theologians will say that this is impossible, since a spirit is not material, and the scientists will say that in that case there is no pointing talking about it, since it is nonexistent, and so on.

Whereas the anthropologists might say that whether a soul can be shown to exist is beside the point: insofar as people believe in souls and act as if they believe in them, they are a formative part of culture and of human life, at that time, there. And so forth.

But, from the students of literature, you would get instead some pertinent quotes, such as Hamlet's rumination: "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals. And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

The modern smarty-pants might cry, "He's depressed! Quick! Take a Zoloft!" Which would be impertinent, because Hamlet is, on many counts, right: "The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals," check. At least in our own eyes. The quintessence of dust, also check. And also in our own eyes. We exist on a continuum, from very high to very low. The humanities might be said to be the study of that continuum.



Are our human values changing? Our human interests are not—they remain constant—but the way we are approaching those interests and attaching values to manifestations of them may in fact be in flux. As it usually is.

For instance, the whole human being is coming back into fashion. After a century of more and more specialization, there is a movement to link together areas of study previously considered separate. We are seeing this in all areas; in medicine, for instance, there is a new interest in treating the whole patient, not just his left tonsil. People are getting tired of being viewed as mere collections of body parts; and doctors are getting tired of being viewed as just a means to a profit margin. Some of them actually want to help people. People. Not only their toes.

There is a new book called *Art and Energy*, by Barry Lord, that connects the kind of energy used in each historical period—wood, slaves, coal, oil, electricity, renewables—with the kind of art made and valued at those times. It seems obvious once said—why wouldn't there be a connection?—but it is fascinating to note that someone is now actually making it. According to Lord, we are transitioning from an age of carbon

energy and consumerism to an age of renewables and stewardship. *Use it and toss it* will go out of fashion; *conserve it and save it* will come in. And thus the nature of new artworks is changing.

Parallel work is being done by Ian Morris at Stanford, correlating the kinds of food sources and energy used in a given period to the social values of that period. Among hunter-gatherers, there was more gender equality than among agriculturalists, for example. Among the agriculturalists, hierarchies, with kings at the upper end and peasants or slaves at the lower end, were the norm; men plowed, women wove, and so forth. And now, in the age of keyboards—not requiring a lot of upper-body strength—genders are becoming more equal once again. I think we will see quite a lot more of this kind of crossover study in the years to come.

That may be what is happening at the academic level, but what about the mega-level—the human race itself? Where are we headed? And is it a good place?

Here is my big pronouncement: It is the best of times, it is the worst of times. (Hint: Charles Dickens. *Tale of Two Cities*.) In the “best of times” corner, the pace of the increase in knowledge and discovery in all areas of science is breathtaking. Inventions and procedures that were merely theoretical even ten years ago are with us now, and new wonders appear, it seems, every week, spurred on by mind-bending advances in computing and data processing. Among the most riveting projects are those involving genetics: through genetic studies, we can open a window into the deep past, trace the connections among organisms, and seek answers to questions such as, what part of the prehuman brain changed to allow for advanced language and symbolic thinking? In genetic engineering, we may soon be able to cure inherited disease. And that is just one part of the amazing human multiexperiment now taking place. Artificial intelligence, the Internet of things, the ability to make ourselves smarter, healthier, older for longer, and, yes, cuter and hunkier—it’s all on the table.

In the worst of times corner, there are a lot of contenders.

As the planet warms—we won’t argue about the causes just now, but the facts themselves are inescapable—as the planet warms, (1) the sea expands, (2) more evaporation takes place, so there is (3) more precipitation in some places; and (4), more hot air rises, causing stronger winds and more extreme weather events, leading to (5) lower food production, which will lead to more political instability, as people in stricken areas fight for resources. This is not me making it up, it’s the Pentagon, so if you want to accuse them all of being lunatics, be my guest. (Hint: they’ve got some

weapons.) Moreover, warming in temperate zones will lead to an influx of invasive species, and the spread of tropical diseases. Having fun so far?

More important: Did your blood pressure go up? Probably not, because you have heard it before; also I communicated it in a general way, and did not include an individual protagonist with whose struggles you could identify. We gnaw our nails over Tiny Tim, but not over statistics.

Which is of course where the artists come in, because that's what art—narrative art, visual art, movies, TV, dance, history—all the things the humanities are, and also study—that's what art does. Art makes it personal. To understand war, you can read about strategy and tactics. And you can also read *The Iliad*. Which is more real? The former. Which touches us more deeply? The latter. It's real in a different way.

I was lucky enough to be in Greece this past summer, and to stand in the amphitheater where the great plays of Sophocles were first performed. Sophocles was a war veteran. Some of his plays are about war and the damage it can do to individuals. Right now, in the United States, there is a theater group that performs to war vets. The effect is therapeutic—much more so than therapies of other kinds. Because art can take you inside a mind, it can show you what trauma *feels* like. To be understood on such a deep level is transformative; no mere clinical description comes anywhere close.

In a mirror project, vets who had suffered brain damage from explosions but could not describe what that felt like were asked to make masks of themselves *showing* what it felt like. The resulting created objects—which you can see in the National Geographic—are extraordinary. And they are extraordinary, not only as expressions of personal emotion, but also as art. They are what T. S. Eliot would have called the objective correlative of damage. Have a look.

We make art because that is who we are. We are art-making beings. And we understand art at a deep level for the same reason. Any educational system that ignores this fact is ignoring our essential human being. If all you want is a trade school—something that will help people get jobs—that's fine, and there's nothing wrong with it. But if you are interested in human wholeness, the humanities must be engaged.

That's not just my personal opinion. It's our opinion. It's us.

At weddings, funerals, and other threshold moments of life, we do not recite our income tax reports. If we recite, it is likely to be poetry. We speak; we sing; we engage in rituals that are meaningful to us, because

they connect us, not only with ourselves, but with our communities and with the human race.

Or, as John Donne once put it, back in the seventeenth century:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

