

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #534 - Lies in Defense of Humanism

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Starting some 3 million years ago, human-like creatures (not apes, but hominids) began to appear on the earth. From physical evidence, paleontologists have learned about the evolution of these hominids, naming the oldest species Australopithecus, then Homo habilis (2.5 million years ago), Homo erectus (1.5 million years ago), and finally our own species, Homo sapiens (60,000 to 100,000 years ago).[1]

Throughout this 3 million-year lineage, humans were just another insignificant animal among many. During this long period, all humans shared a single religion, which, today, we would call animism -- attributing an indwelling spirit to every material form. Then, during the period 10,000 to 2,000 years ago, humankind's view of itself slowly changed. Roughly 3500 to 1500 years ago (in other words, in the most recent 0.08% of humanity's time on Earth), the major religions of the modern world appeared, the religions that dominate human thinking today --Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism. From this point onward, humans have thought of themselves as special creatures, quite distinct and apart from the other animals.

The stories from the major modern religions agree: the purpose of the creation of the Earth was to provide a home for humans and the purpose of evolution was to evolve modern humans, after which evolution stopped. In this view, because the Earth was created for humans, the Earth is specially adapted to taking care of human needs. East, West, capitalist or communist, everyone could agree on this. The world was created for us to exploit, and exploiting it actually IMPROVED it. As Daniel Quinn expressed it in his recent novel, THE STORY OF B:

"Scrape away the forests, fill in the wetlands, dam the rivers, dump poisons anywhere you want, as much as you want. None of this was regarded as wicked or dangerous. Good heavens, why would it be? The earth was created specifically to be used in this way. It was a limitless, indestructible playground for humans. You simply didn't have to consider the possibility of running out of something or of damaging something. The earth was designed to take any punishment, to absorb and sweeten any toxin, in any quantity. Explode nuclear weapons? Good heavens, yes--as many as you want. Thousands, if you like. Radioactive material generated while trying to achieve our God-given destiny can't harm us.

"Wipe out whole species? Absolutely! Why ever not? If people don't need these creatures, then obviously they're superfluous. To exercise such control over the world is to HUMANIZE it, is to take us a step closer to our destiny."[2]

In sum, the philosophy called humanism (which assumes a cardinal role for humans on Earth) now dominates the entire planet, East and West, North and South.[3]

Now, however, evidence is piling up at an accelerating pace indicating that these deeply-held cultural assumptions are dead wrong. Humans are just another animal; furthermore, humans in a humanist culture are a phenomenally destructive animal. On top of that, it is now clear that Earth was not created as a plaything for humans, and it is not exempt from harm by humans' destructive impulses. Human activities are now damaging the planet on a grand scale. Where is this humanist culture leading? Toward global ecological degradation which in turn is leading toward human extinction.[4]

Thus the assumptions of humanism have been turned upside down by the recent findings of scientists in diverse fields of study. Daniel Quinn dates the initial overturning to 1962, when Rachel Carson published SILENT SPRING, and we have no reason to dispute that dating. Ms. Carson told compelling stories of twin dangers: radioactivity from nuclear fallout, and DDT and the other organochlorine pesticides. Carson showed many people for the first time that humans are capable of wrecking the Earth's ecosystems that sustain life. In the 35 years since SILENT SPRING, thousands

of scientific studies have confirmed and expanded our knowledge of our true place in the order of things: we humanist humans are chiefly destroyers, desert-makers, dealers in death.

The effect of these revelations upon our culture has been devastating: the main intellectual, emotional, and spiritual underpinnings of our culture have been revealed as false. As a result, our culture is convulsed by confusion and chaos everywhere. Our history, legends, customs, laws, rituals, art, stories, and songs all derived from, and reinforced, the culture of humanism. Humanism told us our place in the scheme of things, our vision of where we fit in the universe. Now many among us --particularly the young --find themselves loose from their moorings, bereft of cultural guidance. The old humanist views, the old ways, the old myths, are pretty clearly leading us toward extinction, but life-sustaining alternative views, ways, and myths have not yet been widely accepted. In sum, we are in the midst of a revolution, with all the danger, pain and deep uncertainty that revolutions always entail.[5]

It is against this backdrop that we must view the "chemical wars" of our own time, of which the Alar story is but a minor skirmish.

Today, after 25 years of observing the chemical wars first hand, we can identify two main strains of thinking in the world of the chemical corporations and their acolytes: first, there is a Libertarian strain, which argues that "human liberty" is the highest value in the universe and that any effort by government to constrain corporate activities in the name of the "general welfare" (quoting the U.S. Constitution) is foolishly counterproductive at best, and sinful at worst. This Libertarian strain derives directly from the humanist worldview.

The second strain of thinking also derives directly from the humanist worldview: humans are exempt from great harm because they are the pinnacle of creation, the appointed masters of the planet and, indeed, of the universe. If a chemical causes cancer in mice, we should not assume that it might also cause cancer in humans --mice are not little men. Men are special.

ALAR AGAINST THIS BACKDROP: When Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) issued its report on pesticides and children's health in 1989, the news media narrowed the focus to a discussion of only Alar, a synthetic growth hormone sprayed on apples to hold them on the tree longer. High doses of Alar and its breakdown byproduct, UDMH, had been shown to cause cancer in both sexes of mice and hamsters and in male rats. (See REHW #530-#533.)

Today the chemical industry has many clandestine front groups that pretend to be "independent" and "scientific." [6] However, back in 1989, when the Alar story made it onto CBS's "60 Minutes" TV show, the chemical industry had only a few such "public interest pretender" groups. In 1989 the industry's main front group was something called the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH). The ACSH had been started in 1978 by Elizabeth ("Beth") Whelan, who has a degree in public health from Harvard, a devotion to the chemical industry, and a quick tongue. Whelan's mission is to prove to the world that industrial chemicals are safe, particularly industrial chemicals in food.

ACSH does "independent" studies of topics like artificial sweeteners, then seeks funding from groups like the Calorie Control Council to disseminate the results. Monsanto and its subsidiaries, G.D. Searle and the Nutrasweet Co., gave ACSH \$105,000 in 1992 making Monsanto "our largest funder," according to an ACSH memo.[6] The close ties between ACSH and the petrochemical industry are revealed in a comment by Ms. Whelan after she lost some funding from Shell Oil: "When one of the largest international petrochemical companies will not support ACSH, the great defender of petrochemical companies, one wonders who will." [6]

With a seed grant of \$25,000 from Alar's manufacturer, Uniroyal (plus annual donations of roughly \$600,000 from the likes of Exxon, Union Carbide, Dow Chemical, DuPont, General Mills, and other chemical corporations),[7] ACSH got onto the Alar case like a bulldog in 1989 and hasn't let go since. More than any other organization, Whelan's ACSH created the false mythology of the "Alar scare." It was Whelan who coined the phrase "Alar hoax." If it is true that Beth Whelan almost singlehandedly created the false myth of the "Alar scare," it is also true that the "Alar scare" created Beth Whelan: "It was the great Alar scare of 1989 that boosted Whelan into the media stratosphere,"[8] says Howard Kurtz writing in the COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW.

Because she has a sharp tongue and isn't constrained by the facts, Whelan is very quotable, and the press loves to quote her. For example, she'll tell you that the National Cancer Institute and the American Medical Association have both "gone on record saying that the use of Alar on apples never posed any risk to the health of either children or adults." [9] Unfortunately, Whelan's claim is completely false. Neither organization has ever taken an official position on Alar. Whelan made it up. But it sounds convincing, and this audacious style gets her onto the talk shows and into the newspapers where she spins out her false myths, her Libertarian revisions of recent history, and her "humans are special" defense of the chemical industry. It was Whelan who coined the phrase, "Mice are not little men," meaning chemicals that cause cancer in mere mice should not be of special concern to humans.

To the press, Whelan's consistent line is that "a virtual consensus" has emerged among scientists that Alar was never a threat to public health.[10] However, Whelan has to play fast and loose with the facts to create the appearance of such a "consensus." In February, 1992, Whelan prepared a memo called "Confidential update on Alar, 3rd year anniversary, quest to interest '60 Minutes' in an update." [11] The memo describes Whelan's efforts to gather statements from the National Cancer Institute, the American Cancer Society, and the American Academy of Pediatrics saying that Alar was not a problem. When she couldn't get such statements, she expressed dismay in her memo, "So many professional organizations, including the National Cancer Institute and American Cancer Society flatly refused to say that the food supply was safe, that pesticide residues in food were not a cause of cancer, that Alar did not pose a risk.... All of this only serves to make consumers worry more. Indeed the original statements we got from NCI and the current statements from ACS play right into the hands of those who seek to convince us that the American food supply is not safe because of the presence of pesticide residues," Whelan wrote.[11]

Nevertheless, at her press conference Whelan asserted again that there is a consensus among the world's scientific experts that Alar is safe for children to eat. And the press repeats these fabrications, thus establishing the enduring false myth of the "Alar scare."

The philosophy that underpins the false myth of the "Alar scare" seems to be this: Lies that shore up a disintegrating humanist culture are justified. Or perhaps it is much simpler than that: Lies that boost the chemical industry's bottom line are justified.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

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[1] Bernard G. Campbell, HUMAN KIND EMERGING [6th edition] (New York, HarperCollins, 1992). See, for example, pg. 227.

[2] Daniel Quinn, THE STORY OF B (New York: Bantam, 1996), pg. 278.

[3] David Ehrenfeld, THE ARROGANCE OF HUMANISM (New

York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 1981).

[4] See, for example, REHW #441, #446, #524 among many others relevant to this topic.

[5] Thomas S. Kuhn, THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS [Second Edition] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), discusses revolutions in scientific thought but much that he says would apply to revolutions in other kinds of thought as well.

[6] See, for example, "Public Interest Pretenders," CONSUMER REPORTS Vol. 59, No. 5 (May 1994), pgs 316-320.

[7] American Council on Science and Health, TWELFTH ANNUAL FINANCIAL REPORT [Covering Fiscal period July 1, 1989-June 30, 1990] (New York: American Council on Science and Health, 1990), pg. 6.

[8] Howard Kurtz, "Dr. Whelan's Media Operation," COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW Vol. 8, No. 6 (March 1990), pgs. 43-47.

[9] Elizabeth M. Whelan, "Comforted With Apples [letter to the editor]," COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW November/December, 1996, pg. 7.

[10] For example, see "EPA Should Declare Alar No Risk to Humans, ACSH Says," FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS (January 6, 1992, pg. 41.

[11] Elizabeth Whelan, "Confidential Update on Alar, 3rd Year anniversary, quest to interest '60 Minutes' in a revisit," (New York: American Council on Science and Health, February 20, 1992).

Descriptor terms: alar; pesticides; apples; nrhc; natural resources defense council; epa; bans; regulation; daminozide; udmh; carcinogens; cancer; uniroyal; iarc; carcinogen assessment group; cag; intolerable risk; pesticides in our children's food; paleontology; australopithecus; hominids; homo habilis; homo erectus; homo sapiens; animism; buddhism; christianity; hinduism; islam; judaism; daniel quinn; story of b; rachel carson; silent spring; radioactive fallout; ddt; cbs news; sixty minutes; american council on science and health; elizabeth whelan; arrogance of humanism; david ehrenfeld; monsanto; acsh;