

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Our world is composed of millions of different kinds of living things, and each — plant or animal — is viewed by man as either "good" or "bad", depending on how it seems to affect us directly, as living creatures.

Our view is usually severely limited. We see each other living organism on the globe as "good" or "bad" only in light of effects each has on us, alone. Directly. Immediately.

If we were creatures from another planet examining all living things on earth as though through a giant telescope (or microscope in some cases), no living thing here on earth would appear either good or bad, of itself.

It would be seen that all, from the smallest and simplest one-celled plant or animal to the largest and most complicated, are interdependent.

Man, for instance, uses other forms of life, as well as minerals, in thousands of ways to better serve himself. And in turn, the other life-forms use man, as well as each other, in thousands of similar ways.

As man preys on beasts and plants for food and shelter, he is, in turn, preyed upon by insects, germs, viruses, bacteria and fungi, as well as by other animals, including others of his own kind.

This interaction, if viewed from outside our planet, would appear fairly well-balanced, even though in a constant state of change. Powers are distributed and redistributed by the very nature of every type of living creature, and there's an on-going struggle for supremacy in every second of time, every season, every century.

From man's point of view, it's his destiny to reign over all other living things on earth. He sees himself as the highest and most intelligent, and as such, utilizes for his own benefit other forms of life in every way he can. That he has succeeded as a species is, to the observer from outer space, a misconception.

If the span man has existed is compared with the span life has existed on this planet, in terms of hours in one day, man has been around for less than the last second of the preceding twenty-four hours.

There's no evidence man will continue to thrive on earth; in fact, there's considerable evidence he may so greatly disturb the balance of interdependence he's destined to survive as a species only for a split-second in geologic time.

In addition to his own contributions to the destruction of his ecology and his exploitation of earth's resources, the continuing forces of all other life in the world struggle to eradicate man, just as they struggle to overwhelm each other.

In what ways is man attacked? What elements conspire to destroy us? Examine the most ludicrous: the one-celled organisms.

By these smallest living creatures, fungi and bacteria, we are bombarded daily. Some attack man directly in the form of disease and rot. Others attack our possessions, appearing as mildews on paint, paper, cloth and leather; mildews thrive in dampness, consuming organic materials of all kinds. Bacteria live on food, attacking plants and animals alike, often causing sickness and death.

There are, of course, some kinds of bacteria and fungi that are useful to us. Were this not true, we might seek ways to destroy these tiny bits of living matter. And were we to try, we might succeed. If we did succeed, we would be taking a giant step to self-destruction.

Not only would we wipe out fungi that make bread rise, that ferment carbohydrates (from these yeasts we obtain alcoholic beverages), we would destroy the organisms which break down organic materials, plant and animal, and return to the soils nutrients for crops we depend on for food.

Should we ever succeed in eliminating molds, mildews and bacteria, we would assure that man not only starved but that he starved while slowly but surely being buried in debris accumulating day-by-day, never rotting away, never breaking down into component parts for re-use.

The soil would quickly become unproductive, deprived of nutrients for new generations of plants. Seedlings would wither and die. The world as a planet would not come to an end but the world's ambient environment for life would cease. Earth would become as dead as the moon.

For a time rains and snows would fall, frosts and thaws would come and go; the seas would continue to heave and rivers to flow; fires, started by lightning strikes, would consume quantities of organic material. Gradually dusts would accumulate on the land surfaces as all animal and plant debris slowly disintegrated into fine particles and ash.

That organic matter left, however, would not support life, for only fungi and bacteria convert it to useable food for plants, and animals of all kinds depend on plants for their food.

The atmosphere would undergo changes as well, for plants and animals, interdependent as they are, constantly replenish the atmosphere through consumption and break-down of air, food and water, into the materials that enrich the soil; the cycle goes on and on through endless time, unless man, or some other creature, interrupts it.

Nevertheless there are some kinds of bacteria and fungi we strive to control for our health and comfort.

Sunshine, a dry climate, and strong chemicals, particularly the chlorines found in bleach and soap, are useful in control of both bacteria and fungi.

We can protect clothing, footwear, books, painted surfaces and furniture from mildew by keeping them dry and clean.

During humid summer weather, air conditioners help control molds. Any system to move fresh air helps. Just leaving drawers slightly open and closet doors ajar aid in control. Leather shoes and bags should be cleaned and thoroughly waxed before storing in an airy place, away from clothing.

Grease and dirt nourish bacteria and mildews; washing walls with a bleach-solution will remove mildew and help prevent its recurrence. Painting over mildew does little to discourage its growth.

Clothing or fabrics should be aired and brushed, out of doors on a sunny dry day, then washed or dry-cleaned before storing away.

Upholstered articles, mattresses, or rugs may be sponged lightly with thick soap suds, wiped with a clean damp cloth, then wiped again with a cloth wrung out of diluted alcohol. Dry thoroughly and quickly.

If books become mildewed, dry the pages by spreading the books fan-wise in the sun or a warm place. When the paper is dry, wipe off the smutty spots with a clean dry cloth. Check frequently to be sure new growth hasn't started.

Bacteria that attack people are often overpowered by our own natural defenses, but sometimes help of prescribed medications is needed for reinforcement. Most bacteria — with which we are constantly surrounded and carry with us on and in our bodies — are harmless to us.

Next time you face a battle with these almost-invisible life-forms, remember some are useful and even "good" for us, while others may be a nuisance and require attention to keep under control.

Without them, and the work they do, we can't survive. If we can learn what man's needs are, to maintain our finger-tip grip on life, and how to work best within the system, we may stink around long enough to achieve some degree of immortality as a species.