

DEAR STUDENT,

Welcome to anthropology.

If you're like me, you have no idea what you're in for. I didn't even know what anthropology was when I first enrolled. Many people have stepped into anthropology classes expecting to fulfill a simple requirement by memorizing a few key words and regurgitating them on the exams, only to find themselves radically shaken and transformed by the experience.

One way to organize a book about anthropology – the study of all humans in all times in all places – would be to tell the entire human story, attempting to give equal space to each moment of our history.

We might start the book 12,000 years ago, a time when everybody everywhere was living in basically the same way, by foraging, hunting, and fishing for food. If the book were roughly the size of the one you're holding now, each page would cover about 50 years. The book would begin with a description of our pre-agricultural ancestors,

people who lived in small bands with populations that rarely exceeded 50 people. Somewhere around page 15, somebody plants the first seeds, we start domesticating animals, and people start to settle in larger, more stable villages.

But change is slow. Halfway through the book, we're still using stone tools. Just past the middle of the book, writing emerges, along with the domestication of the horse and the invention of carts and chariots. The first empires emerge in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and China. And in the next chapter the Greeks, Romans, Mayans, Aztecs, and Ottomans take us to the brink of the final chapter.

With 10 pages left in the book (500 years in the past) you notice that the book is almost over, and yet almost nothing of the world that you know and take for granted exists. Most people have never ventured more than 10 miles from home. College does not exist. The United States does not exist. Most people would not be able to read this book.

A flurry of activity ensues. Packed into those final pages are the stories of European colonial empires spreading to touch nearly every corner of the globe. The Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, the birth of nations, an ever more complex legalistic bureaucracy, new concepts of the family and childhood, educational reforms, and the idea of human rights emerge. With just four pages left the Industrial Revolution appears, along with the rise of science, medicine, and other new technologies.

The everyday lives of people in these last few pages are fundamentally different than all those before. And not just because of the technologies they use, but because of the questions they ask. For the first time in human history, the average person has to continually ask themselves three questions that almost no human in that long history before has had to ask:

- *Who am I?*
- *What am I going to do?*
- *Am I going to make it?*

For almost all of human history, no one asked these questions, because the answers were already known. We were who we were, we would do what our parents did, and our future was not in our own hands. Modernity brought with it a world of choices, and with choices come questions and an obligation to answer them.

And the questions go far beyond ourselves, for the second-to-last page signals an irresolvable climax. We build technologies that allow us to send messages at the speed of light. Automobiles start taking us faster and farther, dramatically changing the way we live and how we build our cities. We even learn to fly. By the end of the page, we can cross oceans in a matter of hours. But such progress is set against a backdrop of two ghastly world wars that killed nearly 100 million people. As you turn the final page, it must be apparent that this story cannot possibly resolve itself and end well.

On the last page you find that humans are more prosperous than ever, but there is a worrying and perplexing set of problems and paradoxes emerging. For while the final few pages have brought us tremendous technological advances and higher standards of living, they haven't brought us more happiness. In fact, even though we are more connected than ever, we feel *less* connected. We have more power to do and be anything we desire, yet we feel more *disempowered*. Our lives are saturated with the artifacts of an absolute explosion of human creativity, and yet we struggle to find meaning.

The last page also describes a world of unparalleled global inequality and a precarious environmental situation. Our population is more than 20 times what it was at the start of the chapter, but the richest 225 humans on earth have more wealth than the poorest 2.5 billion people combined. Nearly one billion people make less than \$1/day. Humans produce more than enough food to feed everyone in the world, yet hundreds of millions are starving, even as we collectively spend over \$1 trillion per year preparing to fight one another.

The final pages describe how we created an astounding global economy running on nonrenewable fossil fuels, but on the last page, it becomes apparent that all those resources will be gone by the third page of the epilogue. Furthermore, the use of these fuels has changed the chemistry of our planet, leading to a rise in global temperature, rising sea levels, expanding deserts, and more intense storms. Perhaps most dramatic, it is in these final pages that we human beings have attained the ability to literally end the book altogether and annihilate ourselves. We might do it at the push of a button, launching a nuclear war; or we might do it slowly and painfully, through environmental collapse. Whether or not the story continues will largely be up to choices we make.

Three new questions emerge:

- *Who are we?*
- *What are we going to do?*
- *Are we going to make it?*

Anthropology is the discipline that attempts to answer these questions about humans and their place in the world. By practicing anthropology, you might just find a few answers to those other three questions (*Who am I? What am I going to do? Am I going to make it?*) and learn a little bit more about yourself and your own place in the world.

January 14, 2015 864,646 notes

tahtahtahia:

today my anthro professor said something kindof really beautiful:

“you all have a little bit of ‘I want to save the world’ in you, that’s why you’re here, in college. I want you to know that it’s okay if you only save one person, and it’s okay if that person is you”

The answers to such questions might not be what you expect. In fact, the answers to these questions will only open up new questions,

and you will soon find yourself on a sort of quest, question after question after question. Anthropology doesn't just seek to answer questions; it leads us to discover new questions that we have not even considered before.

You might, as I did, come to cherish these questions. Yes, they will turn you inside out and upside down. You may spend a few sleepless nights questioning your most basic ideas, ideals, values, and beliefs. But you might also come to see these questions as great gifts that reveal worlds and ideas you cannot yet imagine.

Anthropologists look for answers not just in books and data but out in the world itself, by making connections with people across vast cultural differences. This is a necessary part of understanding the entirety of the human condition. We have to understand the diversity that makes up the human experience.

It is experience itself that lies at the heart of anthropology. Anthropology opens the doors of the world to you so that you can *experience more*. In order to experience more, you will have to step outside your comfort zone and *experience difference*. And when you have experienced difference, you will be able to come back to more familiar settings and *experience differently*. Why do we want to experience more, experience difference, and experience differently? Because our experiences become an integral part of who we are. When we experience more, we can *be* more.

In sum, Anthropology is not only the science of human beings, but also the art of asking questions, making connections, and trying new things. These are the very practices that make us who we are as human beings. Anthropology is the art of being human.

This art is not easy. You will have to overcome your fears, step outside your comfort zone, and get comfortable with the uncomfortable. "Anthropology requires strength, valor, and courage," Nancy Scheper-Hughes reminds us. "Pierre Bourdieu called anthropology a combat sport, an extreme sport as well as a tough and rigorous discipline. ... It teaches students not to be afraid of getting one's hands dirty, to get down in the dirt, and to commit yourself,

body and mind. Susan Sontag called anthropology a 'heroic' profession."

What's the payoff for this heroic journey? If you're like me, you will discover in anthropology new questions and new ideas. You will try, as I did, to make them your own. But you can't own ideas. I did not have the ideas; the ideas had me. They carried me across rivers of doubt and uncertainty, where I found the light and life of places forgotten. I climbed mountains of fear. I felt their jagged edges, wiped their dust from my brow, and left my blood in their soil. There is a struggle to be had, for sure. You may not find the meaning of life, but you might just have the experience of being alive.

Above all, the art of being human takes practice. As such, I present this book not as a typical textbook, full of bold-faced terms for you to memorize and regurgitate on exams. There *will* be some of that, as there are always new concepts and terms to learn as you step into a new way of thinking. But above all, there will be a simple idea at work: that anthropology is not just a science. It's a way of life, and for most people, a new way of thinking that will open them up to being the best human beings they can be. So we proceed in recognition of that simple truth:

*You cannot just think your way into a new way of living.*

*You have to live your way into a new way of thinking.*

The course will proceed through ten lessons, representing the Ten Big Ideas that you can learn by studying anthropology. Laid out together in sequence, they read almost like a manifesto:

1. People are different. These differences represent the vast range of human potential and possibility. Our assumptions, beliefs, values, ideas, ideals – even our abilities – are largely a product of our culture.

2. We can respond to such differences with hate or ignorance, or we can choose to open up to them and ask questions we have never considered before.
3. When we open up to such questions, we put ourselves in touch with our higher nature. It was asking questions, making connections, and trying new things that brought us down from the trees, and took us to the moon.
4. It is not easy to see our assumptions. Our most basic assumptions are embedded in the basic elements of our everyday lives (our language, our routines and habits, our technologies).
5. "We create our tools and then our tools create us."<sup>1</sup>
6. Most of what we take as "reality" is a cultural construction ("real"-ized through our unseen, unexamined assumptions of what is right, true, or possible.)
7. We fail to examine our assumptions not just because they are hard to see, but also because they are safe and comfortable. They allow us to live with the flattering illusion that "I am the center of the universe, and what matters are my immediate needs and desires."
8. Our failure to move beyond such a view has led to the tragedy of our times: that we are more connected than ever, yet feel and act more disconnected.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from John Culkin, 1967

9. Memorizing these ideas is easy. Living them takes a lifetime of practice. Fortunately, the heroes of all time have walked before us. They show us the path.
  
10. They show us that collectively, we make the world. Understanding how we make the world – how it could be made or understood differently – is the road toward realizing our full human potential. It is the road to true freedom.

Each lesson concludes with a challenge that will allow you to "live your way" into this new way of thinking. You will talk to strangers, do fieldwork, get comfortable with the uncomfortable, try new things, break habits, reach out across great distances to discover how you are connected to other people all over the planet, encounter and come to appreciate people radically different from you, and ultimately come back home to see yourself as a new kind of person, a hero in your own way, ready to be the best human you can be.

You don't have to journey alone. Go to [ANTH101.com](http://ANTH101.com) and share your challenges and progress with others. It's the perfect place to ask questions, make connections, and try new things. It's a place to practice the art of being human.

See you there,  
Professor Wesch