

7 MILLION YEARS OLD  
AND CHANGING THE WAY  
WE SEE OUR PAST...45 YEARS OLD  
AND CHANGING THE WAY  
WE SEE OUR FUTURE...

EMERSON  
Emerson@rocknet.net.au



## September 11: a mixed metaphor

by MARY KALANTZIS

AS I began collecting my thoughts about September 11 for this article, my attention was drawn to a story and a metaphor in a recent *Newsweek* article. The story was about the discovery in Chad of the "oldest fossil of human ancestry". It was as a seven million year old skull, ostensibly pointing both to variety in our origins and the possibly shared beginning of humans and apes (July 22-29, 2002, pp.66-69). It reminded me that the desire to understand what it is to be human, in every respect, remains potent and elusive. And that the events and the stories created in the human narrative come and go with awesome speed, cycle through ups and downs, twists and turns. Through all, we humans seem to sustain an almost numbing capacity to endure and reframe, to appropriate narratives and ascribe meaning to events.

The metaphor that most startled me was slipped in casually to describe the place where the skull was found. "Though now as flat as a dot-com's revenues, millions of years ago the Djourab desert was a huge basin surrounding a freshwater lake teeming with now extinct fish and amphibious mammals." What would one have made of this a couple of years ago, to think that 'dot-com revenues' would become so quickly as extinct as the lush environment of the Djourab desert? Yet there it was. A world-changing phenomenon reduced to a mundane metaphor.

September 11 has become another such metaphor. Clanging, mixed, ambiguous, double-speaking. The events of that day have become the basis for a wide range of reflections about life, its purpose and values. The nature of religious faith, and the task of juggling the world of multiple and divergent religious views, has become a respectable topic again. But this is only the beginning of the numerous ways in which September 11 has become a metaphor and a symbolic turning point. It has become that for almost anything you can think of, from the boom and bust of the dot-com economy, to the symbolism of skyscrapers, to the nature of the modern metropolis, to the hazards of travel, to the conditions of personal and natural security. All of these subjects, it seems, can be cast in a different light since that moment of ghastly revelation.

Like many others I too grasped opportunistically at the power of that moment, possibly even as the symbolic basis for a little strategic optimism. Maybe, just maybe, this moment could be a catalyst for thinking about what is really important again – to put humanity (diversities, identities, belonging) up there alongside the market, science and politics. To breathe life again into the project of recognising, affirming and understanding diversity. To tackle in a global and collaborative way the nasty conjunction of cultural difference and social inequality.

IN the first few days of reporting, CNN described these direct hits to the heart of US global business interests and defence headquarters as a "low tech/high concept" phenomenon. That phrase provided a kind of key for me. Evil, terrorists, oppressors, martyrs, men of God – it was about meaning and humanity, not the genius or might and science of technology and the market which so dominates the thinking of advanced democracies. As an educator I wanted to salvage something out of the tragedy for my purposes.

The other aspect of my strategic optimism was that this was an opportunity for the US to reconsider the role it might play in the world, given its overwhelmingly powerful influence on global affairs. Perhaps President George Bush's isolationism and unilateralism might be replaced by a genuine engagement with the world. Perhaps the diversity of his cabinet might predispose the US to connect more sympathetically with the world and the cultural range of its interests, creeds, peoples.

But it seemed everyone, of all ideological persuasions, was using September 11 as the touchstone for any interpretation that suited them. And that these were old interpretations recast more often than they were new interpretations borne of the shock of recognition. If the dot-com revenues could be made to elide with the desert in which the skull was found and the clue to all things human, then any distinctive symbolic or interpretative shift was in danger of obliteration by the cacophony of mixed metaphors.

Certainly many commentators, including American ones have warned that hegemonic thinking and systems die hard. September 11 need not be a moment for humility and reflection. Rather, to use Mike Davis' words, the pursuit of "terror" could become a new "steroid of empire". (*NLR* 12 Nov/Dec 2001 p50). Less a turning point than an alibi to return to an old story.

So where does this leave us? The logistics of power and world dominance cloud the possibility of interpreting September 11 in a constructive way, of using this pivot point as the basis for the strategic optimism for which I had been hoping. We certainly refuse to come to terms with genuine diversity despite all the progress and rhetoric made in last few centuries. Quite fundamentally, we still shy away from acting upon a new and difficult principle of equality – that you don't have to be the same to be equal.

SEPTEMBER 11 has created many paradoxical openings. For a moment at least, the Koran became a best seller in the West, although it is hard to know what, on first reading, the book-buying public could make of it. There is a renewed thirst for religious ecumenicalism, an attempt at a certain kind of understanding even though the ecumenical, for all its affected goodwill, faces its epistemological antithesis when it attempts dialogue with fundamentalism.

In Australia, we're been reduced to our blood links with the greater empire of the English, whose political capital and global headquarters shifted from London to the Washington/New York some time during the 20th century. We're right behind our Anglophone brothers in the war on terror, the axis of evil, in eliminating Saddam – whatever. We've been reduced to compliant team players in Huntington's atavistic clash of civilisations.

More's the pity, because we've lost the opportunity of the moment, to reconsider history, identity and worthwhile human futures. Productive big picture doubt has quickly been displaced by race certitude.

The September 11 story remains unfinished. It may well be replayed, perhaps even in more ghastly ways. The real tragedy is that it could have prompted us to address the question of how we create the conditions of security in a world of deep cultural and material division. But it hasn't.

■ Professor Mary Kalantzis is executive dean of the faculty of education, language and community service at RMIT University

### SUBSCRIBE NOW

TO AUSTRALASIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING NEWSPAPER  
Complete and send in the subscription form to receive your Campus Review newspaper and access to the website.



Subscription for 2002 - \$200.50 (Inc. GST)  
Your subscription to Campus Review is tax deductible

- Enclosed is my cheque for A\$200.50 for a 12 month subscription including postage (Overseas subscribers please add A\$110 for annual airmail postage)
- Debit my credit card for the amount of A\$
- Bankcard  Mastercard  Visa  American Express

Name:  Ed Institution:

Street:

Town:  State:  Postcode:

Card No.

Expiry Date:

Cardholder's Name (please print):

Signature:

Tel:  Fax:

Email Address:

Mail to: Campus Review, PO Box 6097, North Sydney NSW 2060 or

Fax it to us on (02) 9954 0565 with your credit card details.

Contact Cindi Stanislas on (02) 9936 8637 or email: cindi.stanislas@camrev.com.au

ABN: 34 010 655 446