

We weren't particularly worried about a disease which was harming pangolins. To be honest I'd never even heard the word pangolin until the disease jumped species and then, once it was in humans we even named the disease. And now, as things stand it has killed over 1 and a half million people and that's just the official COVID deaths in the countries that count them and it doesn't account for such things as cancer or heart disease which overstretched health services have not been able to deal with. There is a quote which is chillingly attributed to Josef Stalin 'A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths are a statistic' which holds true until one of the millions is somebody you knew and loved.

And yet for nature this is of no consequence. We're all going to die anyway and to be honest by most measure our stay on earth is vanishingly brief anyway. If you think about it, the climate emergency we are in would be easily solved by a couple of billion human deaths especially in the rich western world. But even as I said that sentence I recoiled. Human life has a deep value.

Why is human life so important? It may be simply that we are humans ourselves and we work on the basis that if you don't hurt me I won't hurt you. Yet human history with its burnings, mass graves, crucifixions, concentration camps and gulags shows that human life has been seen as cheap.

And what is a human anyway? 99% of our body is made of only 6 elements, oxygen, hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, calcium and phosphorous and most of the final 1% potassium, sulphur, sodium, chlorine and Magnesium. Yet if you were given these elements in the correct proportion you could not make a human and you would not consider these elements particularly valuable, there's no gold or silver for goodness sake.

But even those who are most at ease with reducing humans to just a result of nature will have fallen in love with one or more of these lumps of chemicals, nurtured others and mourned still others. None of us is immune from emotional human connection, and few of us would consider anything else more important than that connection. We may for example fully understand the evolutionary purpose behind our overwhelming desire to protect a human baby but it is not Darwinian evolution that feel.

Almost all of us believe that, even if only at the emotional level people matter. That is the way we seem to be made up. Religions at their best consider nothing greater than a life well lived. And that makes more sense than knowing our chemical composition. Religious texts are much better seen as good poetry than bad science.

And if I wish to understand myself I find the poets know me better than the biologists or anthropologists. I'm not far off 60 and looking back at my life Shakespear got it about right "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women mere players," "They have their exits and entrances, / And one man in his time plays many parts" *As You Like It*. (2.7.138-41).

Exercise: Think of another human being who you care about.

What emotions do you feel?

What memories do you have?

What happened that should not? What has not happened that should?

They are only 11 chemicals you know – how do you respond?