



By Don Hill

Depressed?

You have to budget for feeling *blue* this time of the year. Winter is close at hand, and the days are growing shorter. If you like natural light, this is a bleak season. Mexicans call it the month of the dead—November.

SAD or seasonal affected disorder—a diagnosis attributed to a lack of sunshine—is a common complaint, particularly on the ‘wet’ coast with its dreary backdrop of cloud, a shaft of light occasionally poking through the blanket of grey. This creates the conditions for a mild depression, which can be chronic in some people.

A generation ago, conventional medical wisdom considered the SAD state of mind, ‘all in your head’. Contemporary neuroscience now knows that environmental factors can play heavy on a sensitive person. And that location can mess with your mood (more on this in a moment).

DEPRESSION KILLS

Medical statistics are just beginning to tweak to what has gone unreported in the neighbourhood. A government study in the United States recently found that seven percent of the full-time workforce suffers from some sort of depression. And if you are unemployed, the number heads into double digits. Women, more so than men, tend to get severely depressed.

More bad news: North Americans lead the world in the consumption of antidepressants. We gobble up billions of dollars of prescription drugs every year to make us happy but, instead of improving, the mental health of our communities just seems to get worse. Why?

In a 1952 study that is still debated to this day, psychologist **Hans Eysenck** discovered that *expectancy* has a big hand in determining overall mental health. While it is certainly true that people suffer with melancholy, Dr. Eysenck’s research found that just as many patients improved their mood without psychotherapy as those that did with it. Fully one-third got better by simply visiting their doctor’s office, even though the attending psychologist did little more than show up and greet them.

This suggests there is something specific about *place*—unique qualities, an aesthetic perhaps, that may well create the conditions for making people feel better about themselves.

One thing is for certain: If you are perpetually in a funk, your body will bear the brunt of a bad mood. For instance, medical science long ago declared the perils of having a so-called *Type A* personality; a hard-driving demeanor will takes its toll on the heart.

Depression is now linked to a whole gamut of physical ailments—from digestive problems to muscle

pain—there is an intimate connection between how you are feeling and what you have been made to feel.

A publicly supported health care system can ill afford to not pay attention to the mental environment. I have been persuaded that the very nature of the places we live—the design of our urban environments, inside and out, be it the workplace, our homes included—has a hand in shaping our moods just like seasonal weather does. I am not alone in this view. For 10 years, I have been working with a group of neuroscientists who are investigating what I call the *architecture of well-being*.

ARCHITECTURE OF WELL-BEING

It is cliché, but it is true that cities tend to make strangers of us. And loneliness is a leading cause of depression.

There is also the loneliness associated with an unbearable sense that this—*this* meaning so-called reality—is all that there is. Churches once served as a welcoming place to seek out greater truths, but they are rarely open during the day let alone the night. So what I have constructed is an electronic sanctuary, a respite from the debilitating affects and effects of 21st Century living... a small enclosure to shake off the blues, the experimental device is a replica of what is already occurring in nature.

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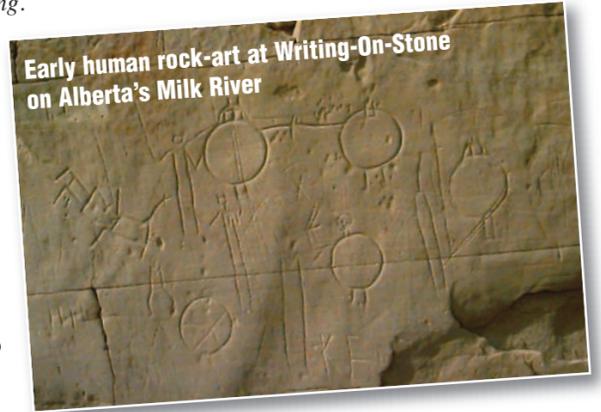
Human beings have long known about the power of some places to heal, and have marked these special spots with engravings or painted designs on stone. Universally known as ‘rock art’, these ancient petroglyphs, pictographs and petroforms are also found around the world.

Some of the finest rock art is located in Canada, along waterways such as Writing-On-Stone on Alberta’s Milk River, the magnificent Hickson Lake pictographs on the Churchill River system in northern Saskatchewan, Agawa’s inscription rock on the north shore of Lake Superior, as well as multiple pictograph spots on Lake of the Woods, and along the Stein River valley in British Columbia where “they write their dreams upon the rock forever.”

My scientific colleagues and I have simulated the sense of well-being that is sometimes associated with rock art locations. If you want to know more about this

work, see the specially-designed technology for yourself (there will be a public exhibition toward the end of the month) follow the link to my website, which is tagged at the end of the column.

Rock art locations are increasingly under threat of development or neglect as a consequence of our present-day ignorance of what these magnificent spots are for: They are the ‘teaching rocks’... they are a communication system—stone-age technology. They tell the story of who and what and *when* we are.



“The world can tell us everything we want to know,” **Quitsak Tarkiasuk**, an Inuit elder says in *Voices from the Bay*. “The only problem for the world is that it doesn’t have a voice. But, the world’s indicators are there. They are always talking to us.”

It is all about paying attention. Other realms of reality are available to human beings when our eyes and ears and feelings are not distracted by the *consensus trance*, the illusory modern world immersing us all. However, as more and more people are pushed into urban environments, the capacity to be sensitive to the subtle signals of place is muted. In fact, the very ability of the natural environment to speak to us is confounded by the crash and roar of urban living; it is possible that within a generation or two, this distortion will become the preferred aesthetic.

No wonder so many people are depressed. ✓

Don Hill is a ‘thought leader’ at the Leadership Lab and Leadership Development at the Banff Centre. He is also an award-winning writer and broadcaster with a large footprint on the Internet. Listen to his radio series Inspiring Leadership, a 20-part documentary on contemporary leadership and the challenge of leading in the 21st Century every Saturday morning at 8 AM on the CKUA Radio Network.

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