

Human Nature on Display

“Man has always been his most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself?” I recalled these words, written seventy years ago by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, as I heard reports of the beginnings of two different eras, declared this past April 15. Francis Collins, director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, pronounced *that* day the first of the genetic era. Half way around the world, others were declaring a new era for democracy in Iraq.

Collins’s declaration was prompted by the completion of the map of the full human genome. All the genetic information that makes us human was on a DVD, which he waved triumphantly before the cameras. The information on that disk will help scientists identify the genes associated with particular diseases as well as traits and behaviors of all kinds.

For all the possibilities for our self-understanding the genetic era now brings, Collins’s announcement was lost in the news of a new era of freedom amid the ruins of war. The Iraq war and its aftermath laid bare just how vexing a problem we are to ourselves. As if to underline this fact, the first meeting on governing free Iraq took place in a tent surrounded by barbed wire.

On the one hand, the scene in Iraq is a depressing reminder at the dawn of a new century that for all our progress, war is evidently still not obsolete. In the conflict, the arrogance of nations, expressed in the ambition to impose the virtue of democracy through the vice of war, met the messianic ambitions of a brutal dictator.

On the other hand, the era of Iraqi democracy affirms the universality of the desire for freedom and self-rule. The war also gave us stories of selfless rescue, welcoming the stranger, and even loving the enemy.

In light of such paradoxes, I am tempted to ask whether the answer to the puzzle of our human nature is to be found on Collins’s DVD. To be sure, study of the human genome will tell us a great deal about us. We already know, for instance, that despite our differences, we are genetically 99.9 percent the same—from Mahatma Gandhi to Saddam Hussein. We are also 98 percent genetically identical to chimpanzees. There is evidence of genes associated with aggression, as well as altruism. Scientists will undoubtedly find genetic links to other traits of character as well, and possible ways to enhance them.

Mapping the human genome took fifty years. World peace still eludes us. Aldous Huxley’s novel, *Brave New World*, envisioned genetic engineering and drugs like soma pacifying the world and making everybody happy. But believing in genetic technology as the answer to our vexing human nature is just another form of arrogance. A fundamental ignorance of our nature will remain. Collins himself expressed some comfort in that. “There is still our spiritual nature,” he said, “which is elusive, and I’m glad for that.”

It is comforting to realize that we are not, in our essence, reducible to a DVD. But if we think finding our way through the ethical challenges raised by the human genome is difficult—and it certainly will be difficult—finding ways to liberate ourselves from oppression without killing ourselves through war will require a collective effort that has so far eluded us.

It is to the best of our elusive nature that we must look if we are to fulfill the promises of both the genetic era and the new era in the Middle East. The war in Iraq, more than anything, was a failure to understand people, combined with a tragic and profound failure of imagination regarding how to solve our problems more peacefully. To overcome this, we should expect more from our leaders and ourselves than tired tactics that rely on the worst of human nature. Instead, we should begin these new eras with a collaborative exercise of moral and even spiritual imagination on behalf of discovering the best of our common humanity. Only through that effort will we come to understand ourselves well enough to make war, one day, truly obsolete.

Mark J. Hanson is a research faculty member of the Practical Ethics Center at the University of Montana.