



Over-parenting: Parents who won't let go

In my ten years teaching at UPM, I have met several students (some of them First Class Honors) who have shared with me about their problem with their parents, or more specifically, their problem of *parents who won't let go*.



Time cover (Issue Nov 2009) (photo from www.time.com)

Although these students are in their mid-twenties, their parents still see them as small boys or girls, who are still immature and incapable of making wise decisions on their own. Consequently, their parents believe that they are actually helping

their children by making all the decisions for their children: decisions such as where their children should work, whether their children should continue with further studies, or even if their children should go overseas to attend a fully sponsored scientific conference. These students of mine, though already adults, live under their parent's long shadow and iron-gripped rule.

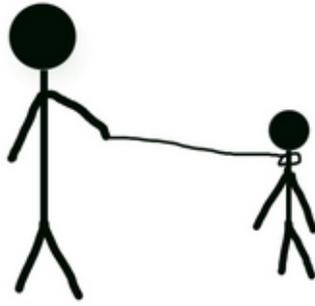
You can choose your partner and friends, but, unfortunately, you cannot choose your parents. If you are blessed with good parents, lucky you. But if you are damned with bad parents, you risk lifelong psychological stress, low self-confidence, inability to reason and think, and incapable to manage well your life and work.

My students have reluctantly aborted their postgraduate studies under me simply because their parents decided against it. No, the problem wasn't because their parents could not afford to support their postgraduate studies. Back then, I had my research grants that I could provide as much as RM1,500 per month. Sure, not as high as what they could earn from working, but this amount is enough for food, rent, studies, and with some left over for a decent social life.

The key problem of these students isn't about financial support, but about their parents who won't let go. My students have described to me how they have been blackmailed and threatened if they continue their current path of postgraduate study. Judging from the parents' reaction, you wouldn't have guess that all the fuss and verbal assault was simply about their children wanting to continue to study.

I have one very hardworking student (my most hardworking postgraduate candidate to date) who was forced by her father to choose a job that she clearly did not want. Even though she informed her dad about it, he wouldn't listen. She was close to tears when she shared her frustrations with me. The last I heard from her, she is still doing the job her father wants.

And there was another female student of mine who came to see me one day at my office, downtrodden after being at the receiving end of a week-long verbal lashing from her mother. The reason? My student simply expressed her ambition to do a MSc under me. From the tongue-lashing she received from her mother, you would have thought my student suddenly decided to become a jobless, marijuana-smoking hippie or something.



(picture from
www.nj.com/parenting/eric_r_uhalter)

There are more stories to tell, but all these students of mine share a common problem of *parents who won't let go*. These parents do not realize the harm they are doing to their own children.

In response to (adult) students who have *parents who won't let go*, I have this advice for them:

1. If you are still staying with your parents and can afford to rent a place on your own, move out. The sooner, the better.
2. Stop relying on your parents' help (*i.e.*, money or favours). Live and die on your own.
3. Respect your parents, but do not tolerate their blackmails, threats, or attempts to make you feel guilty (*e.g.*, they tell you they raise you up with much hardship, so, as they imply, you now owe them big time).

Break free from your parents. Rip them out. Painful or not, just rip them out of your life. They might just realize that you have now all grown up.



No more hullabaloo over English?

“Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia’s ([UKM](#)) contribution to the national education system proves that Bahasa Malaysia can be used in higher education,” so says [Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin](#), who is both the Deputy Prime Minister and the Education Minister of Malaysia.

“Much work [such as academic papers, books, and doctoral theses] have been produced in the Malay language, thanks to the efforts of the UKM lecturers, researchers, professors and the students for the past 40 years...We are proud of UKM’s achievements of being recognised as a research university which has been given self-accreditation status.”

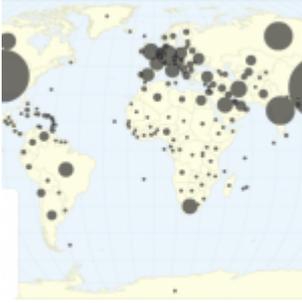
In short, he is implying that UKM’s success in using Malay in the classrooms proves there is no need to resort to teaching in English in the classrooms.

Unfortunately, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin fails to realise that problem of our university students today has little to do whether their universities earn the Research University and/or self-accreditation status. UKM has merely chosen the path of least resistance. Most Malaysians speak and write in Malay better than they do in English. That makes learning and writing in Malay easier for most students.

But is UKM’s success in using Malay as the medium of instruction an indicator of their students’ competitiveness in the global world? No. Our university students, be they from UKM, UPM, or other local universities, are doubly handicapped.

First, our university students do not have the reading and learning culture. They prefer to be spoon-fed with information, told what and how to do things, and learn passively. Second, even if our students tried to read or learn on their own, they would still struggle to understand what they have read from books or the Internet because of their abysmal command in English.

So congratulations to UKM for being a Research University and a self-accreditation institution. But to use UKM as proof that Bahasa Malaysia can be used in higher education is a red herring. It distracts us from the actual and core problems in our education system.



Malaysia statistics: social, development, consumption, and environment

[ChartsBin](#) is an excellent site that compiles and plots some world statistics from various sources. Below are some helpful statistics for Malaysia and the World that are related to several social, development, consumption, and environment aspects. The links to the charts are also provided.

Statistics	Malaysia	World	Description
1.			
Oil Consumption Per Capita	18.5	31.1	In number of barrels per day per 1000 persons (1 barrel = 42 US gallons or 159 liters)
2.			
Oil Consumption	474,968	84,455,330	In number of barrels per day (1 barrel = 42 US gallons or 159 liters)
3.			
Oil Production	754,139	81,820,404.59	In number of barrels per day (1 barrel = 42 US gallons or 159 liters)
4.			
Oil Reserves	5.5	1,248.8	In billion barrels (1 barrel = 42 US gallons or 159 liters)

5.			
Oil Reserves-To-Production Ratio	19.83	42.11	Number of years the oil reserves would last at current production rate
6.			
Coal Consumption	11.8	6,647.6	In million metric tons
7.			
Coal Production	0	6,781.2	In million metric tons
8.			
Coal Reserves	4	820,001	In million metric tons
9.			
Natural Gas Consumption Per Capita	1,193	444.1	In cubic meters per person per year
10.			
Natural Gas Consumption	30.67	3,015.4	In billion cubic metres
11.			
Natural Gas Production	62.5 (ranked 14 in the world)	3,065.7	In billion cubic metres
12.			
CO2 Emissions From The Consumption Of Energy Per Capita	6.35	4.52	In metric tons per person. CO2 emissions due to the consumption of petroleum, natural gas, and coal, and also from natural gas flaring.
13.			
CO2 Emissions From The Consumption Of Energy	157.71 (ranked 31 in the world)	29,914.237	In million metric tons
14.			

Water Use Per Capita	372,000	499,000	In liters per person per year
15.			
Renewable Water Resources Per Capita	21.5	24.6	In million liters for each person per year. Renewable water is water that is continuously renewed within reasonable time spans by the hydrological cycle (<i>e.g.</i> , in streams, reservoirs, or aquifers that refill from precipitation, runoff, or groundwater recharge).
16.			
Renewable Water Resources	580	55,372	In billion liters per year. Renewable water is water that is continuously renewed within reasonable time spans by the hydrological cycle (<i>e.g.</i> , in streams, reservoirs, or aquifers that refill from precipitation, runoff, or groundwater recharge)
17.			
Threatened Animal Species	481	21,873	Number of threatened species of animals in each Red List category: Critically Endangered, Endangered and Vulnerable species of animals
18.			
Threatened Plant Species	685	11,020	Number of threatened species of plants in each Red List category: Critically Endangered, Endangered and Vulnerable species of plants
19.			
Land Area	329,847	510,072,000	In square kilometres
20.			

Global Peace Index (GPI)	1.54	2.02	On a scale of 1 to 5; the lower the score, the more peaceful
21.			
Happy Planet Index (HPI)	54.05 (ranked 33 in the world)	-	HPI is an index of human well-being and environmental impact. On a scale of 0 to 100; the higher the score, the better the human well-being and environmental impact.
22.			
Human Development Index (HDI)	0.83	-	HDI is a summary composite index that measures a country's average achievements in three basic aspects of human development: health, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. On a scale of 0 to 1; the higher the score, the better the overall human development
23.			
Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)	4.5	-	CPI measures the perceived level of public-sector corruption. On a scale of 0 to 10; the higher the score, the less perception of corruption
24.			
Human Freedom	Partly Free	Free: 89 (45.88%) countries Partly Free: 58 (29.9%) countries Not Free: 47 (24.23%) countries	Assesses global political rights and civil liberties. Score: 1.0 to 2.5 are considered "Free"; 3.0 to 5.0, "Partly Free"; and 5.5 to 7.0 "Not Free."
25.			
Number Of Internet Users	15.1	1,674.3	In million persons

26.			
Public Expenditure On Education	4.67	-	In per cent of GDP for education
27.			
Population Density	77.96	13.31	In number of persons per square kilometre
28.			
Population Growth Rate	1.72	1.17	In per cent
29.			
Total Population	25.72	6,790.1	In million persons
30.			
Sex Ratio For Total Population	1.01	1.01	The number of males to each female
31.			
Youngest Population (0-14 Years Old)	31.4	28.39	In per cent
32.			
Adult Population (14-64 Years Old)	63.6	63.72	In per cent
33.			
Oldest Population (Over 64 Years Old)	5.0	7.89	In per cent

Source

1. Abdallah S, Thompson S, Michaelson J, Marks N and Steuer N 2009, *The (un)Happy Planet Index 2.0. Why good lives don't have to cost the Earth, 2009, New economics foundation, London, SE11 5NH* [[Link](#)]
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9. SER Editors Judy Trinnaman and Alan Clarke 2009, *Survey of Energy Resources Interim Update 2009, July 2009*, World Energy Council, London [[Link](#)]
10. The Editor, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2009*, BP Statistical Review of World Energy, June 2009, BP p.l.c., London, UK [[Link](#)]
11. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2009, *AQUASTAT online database, Water use, by sector and by source*, The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Viale delle Terme di Caracalla 00153 Rome, Italy [[Link](#)].
12. Transparency International 2009, *Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), 2009*, Transparency International, Alt-Moabit 96 10559 Berlin [[Link](#)]
13. UIS 2009, *Education, 2009*, United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture Institute for Statistics, Canada [[Link](#)]



Deforestation in Malaysia: Why pick on us?

[Tan Sri Datuk Dr Yusof Basiron](#) is the CEO of the [Malaysian Palm Oil Board Council](#), and he often cites the criticisms particularly by foreign NGOs on Malaysia's oil palm expansion through deforestation as unfair, hypocritical, and careless.



Tan Sri Datuk Dr Yusof
Basiron, CEO, Malaysian
Palm Oil Board Council

“How is it,” Tan Sri says incredulously, “that the UK produces 18 million tonnes of coal per year and the NGOs do not seem to notice the GHG emitted but they can detect burning of a few hectares of forest for agricultural conversion in Indonesia 10,000 km away?”

This amount of coal, he further points out, produces 66 million tonnes of CO₂, which is also equivalent to a deforestation of 378,000 ha of rainforest, a number which is more than double of Malaysia's annual oil palm expansion rate.

Moreover, boycotting of palm oil products or stopping oil palm expansion threaten the livelihood of oil palm smallholders in Malaysia.

So, are these NGOs unfair and careless to pick on Malaysia? Of course. And are they hypocrites because they choose to focus on Malaysia when they have their own environmental concerns in their countries? Of course.

But then this is exactly how foreign NGOs operate. In other words, this is their *modus operandi* (that is, their mode of operation). Let's face it. Our world environment is in a mess, and we are all to blame for it. Over-consumption, over-fishing, over-mining, over-population, over-indulgence, and, of course, over-deforestation. Deforestation is the second largest contributor to anthropogenic climate change, and agriculture is the main reason why deforestation occurs. Tropical rainforest is the "richest" kind of forest type. Clearing one hectare of tropical rainforest destroys more biodiversity and releases more carbon than other types of forest. In short, our tropical rainforests are extra special.

So if you are an environmental NGO, what do you do? Who do you blame on anthropogenic climate change and loss of biodiversity? Rather than spreading yourself too thin by fighting on all environmental fronts, wouldn't it be better to target on a few individuals (or countries) and concentrate all your effort and battles on those selected few? In other words, you have to start somewhere. So, if the deforestation issue mainly concerns you, pick one or two culprits (*e.g.*, Malaysia and Indonesia), then go for the kill. It does not matter that when you pick one or two culprits, you let other culprits off-the-hook. Just pick some culprits (remember, you have to start somewhere), and if you are winning the war, you would be raising awareness on your important issue, and you would be forcing change and forcing other nations to comply.

In the book, [*No Logo*](#), by [Naomi Klein](#), she describes the exact *modus operandi* by NGOs that fight against corporate power and loss of social identity through corporate branding. Big corporations like Shell, Starbucks, Nike, and McDonald's are frequently targeted by NGOs. These four aren't the only big corporations around; there are other big corporations (*e.g.*, Reebok, Adidas, Apple, and Chevron) that are equally guilty, some more than others. But Shell, Starbucks, Nike, and McDonald's *get picked* in exactly the same way a lion picks out an antelope out of a herd of antelopes. Rather than fighting all the corporations at once, pick on the big one, fight it to the death, and if you are successful, you raise awareness, and you force change.

Unfair, careless, and hypocritical of these darn NGOs to pick on Malaysia? Of course. But consider — just for a moment — if there was no external pressure on Malaysia's palm oil industry: Would Malaysia be so in hurry to green her oil palm industry and ensure its sustainability? Of course not.



Increasing world palm oil demand



Deforestation in Malaysia

Palm oil is Malaysia's largest agriculture commodity and has recently become Malaysia's second largest income from exports. It is no surprise then that under the new 10th Malaysian Plan revealed today, Malaysia aims to increase the annual export earnings from palm oil by RM21.9 million to RM69.3 million. It is difficult to see how this target can be achieved without having to open up new lands for oil palm cultivation. Oil palm is a large tree; a single tree can occupy as much as 70 square meters.



Small patch of forest amid oil palm

trees (photo from
www.thestar.com.my)

Deforestation is a sensitive issue in Malaysia, as naïve [Sahabat Alam Malaysia](#) (an NGO affiliated to Friends of the Earth) soon found out. Their aggressive campaign against deforestation by the palm oil industry in Malaysia eventually risked their society being deregistered by the [Registrar of Societies](#) for threatening national interests.



Sahabat Alam Malaysia's
poster

In recent years, Malaysia is under huge pressure to stop the expansion of oil palm plantations through deforestation. Foreign NGOs, such as [Friends of the Earth \(FOE\)](#), [Greenpeace](#), [Wetlands International](#), [Oxfam International](#), [Sawit Watch](#), [World Wide Fund \(WWF\)](#), and [Rainforest Action Network \(RAN\)](#), are actively involved to apply pressure on the Malaysian government to declare a moratorium on oil palm expansion.



A poster to stop the use of palm oil in food

In some ways, the efforts by these NGOs are starting to bear fruits. Cadbury in New Zealand, for example, has stopped using palm oil in their dairy milk chocolate products, and Nestle is under pressure by green consumers to drop the use of palm oil in their food products. The Palm Oil Labeling Bill is also being proposed in Australia. If passed, this Bill would require all food products that use palm oil to be labeled as such, rather than classifying (or “hiding”) the palm oil ingredient under the more generic “vegetable oils” category. Even Malaysia’s palm oil export to the EU has fallen 12% a year since 2006.

So how bad is deforestation in Malaysia? Malaysia is over 58% covered by forest. Compare that figure with the meager figures for some countries. For instance, UK is the least forested country in Europe, and its land area is covered only by 12% forest. The land area of Australia, France, USA, and Germany are covered by 21, 28, 33, and 32% of forest, respectively.



World forest coverage by FRA 2010

Nonetheless, not all forests are created equally. The land area of Malaysia is merely 0.25% of the total land area in the world, but yet this tiny area contains over 10% of the world's plant species and 7% of the world's animal species. Tropical rainforests like those found in Malaysia also contain the largest store of carbon (and nutrients) than other forest types (like tundra, temperate forest, boreal forest, and shrub land). In other words, clearing one hectare of our rainforest destroys more plant and animal species and releases more carbon than clearing an equal area of other forest types.

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recently released the preliminary report called [Global Forest Resources Assessment 2010](#) or better known as FRA 2010. According to this report, net deforestation for the world declined from about 8.3 million ha per year in the 1990s to about 5.2 million ha per year in the 2000s. This 37% reduction in deforestation was possible because of large scale reforestation and afforestation projects by several countries, particularly by China.

I decided to check the deforestation statistics for Malaysia by downloading the [country report for Malaysia from FRA 2010's website](#). In the country report, Malaysia loses an average of 102,000 ha of forest annually, the highest being in the 2000-2005 period which saw a deforestation rate of 140,000 ha per year. As at 2010, Malaysia is 62% forested, with a total forest area of 20.5 million ha.

Nevertheless, FRA 2010 oddly classifies rubber (but not oil palm) plantations as a forest. As Malaysian authorities do not wish to include rubber plantations in the calculations of forested areas, I recalculated the FRA 2010 figures for Malaysia to obtain the following:

Malaysia deforestation statistics (2010)

Forest area: 19.324 million ha (58.6% of land area)

Mean deforestation rate: 68,400 ha per year

Malaysia's mean deforestation rate is 13% of 520,000 ha per year, the world's mean deforestation rate. Malaysia's deforestation rate is also equivalent to the forest size clearing of 11 football (or soccer) fields per hour.

At the Earth Summit, Rio de Janeiro in 1992, Malaysia pledged to keep at least 50% of her land as forest, but these FRA 2010 figures show that Malaysia loses

about 0.19% of her forest annually. At this current deforestation rate, Malaysia would be reduced to 50% forest cover by 2057.

There is some hope though. The deforestation rate in Malaysia has slowed down because Malaysia is actively involved in reforestation projects. FRA 2010 indicates that reforestation in Malaysia increased from an average of 989 ha per year in 1988-1992 to 6839 ha per year in 1998-2002. In 2003-2007, Malaysia's reforestation rate increased to an average of 33,009 ha per year, an increase of nearly five times of that in 1998-2002.

FRA 2010 shows both the good and bad of Malaysia. The bad because it shows that although Malaysia's forest area is less than 0.5% of the world's forest area, Malaysia is responsible for 13% of the world's forest loss every year. The good because it shows that Malaysia is taking an active role to "green" her economy through, among others, reforestation projects. But is reforestation projects enough?



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak tabling the 10th Malaysian Plan today (photo from www.thestar.com.my)

Under the new 10th Malaysian Plan announced today, Malaysia also aims to achieve an annual economic growth of 6% to push Malaysia into a high-income and developed nation. Just six months ago in the Copenhagen 2009 conference, Malaysia has also pledged to reduce her carbon emissions by 40%. This reduction is to be achieved mainly through the use of palm oil as biofuel.

So what we have here is more dependence on our golden oil. Greater economic growth requires greater amount of energy and in turn, greater amount of biofuel from palm oil, which ultimately leads to greater pressure to clear our forests for new oil palm plantations. Malaysia 's greatest challenge today is to balance her desire to be a high-income and developed nation and our environment. Is that possible? With our current priorities and technologies, no, I don't think so.



We can fix you

My sister has started to send her three-year-old daughter to tuition! When I was growing up, it was unheard of to send kids to tuition (or extra classes) even at primary school level. I know of some primary schools that require an entrance exam for Year One hopefuls!



Not smart enough? That'll be fixed soon.
(photo from www.straitstimes.com)

Today is a dog-eat-dog world. Everyone wants to stand out, be the top, and be better in sports, looks, wealth, and intellect than the next person. I know of a [company in Malaysia](#) offering genetic examination on your child to determine your child's predisposition. The rationale is by knowing your child's predisposition and skills, you, as a parent, would be better prepared on how to educate your child, on which schools to send your child, and on what kind of activities that would inculcate your inherent child's skills.

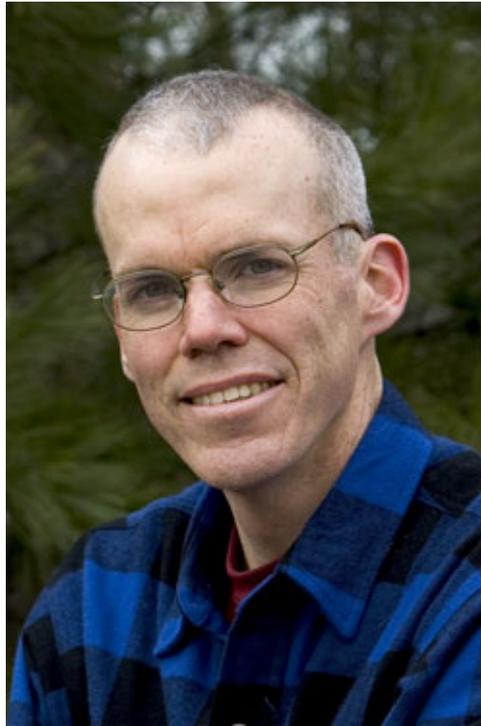
Now, just imagine for the moment that there was some established and safe gene therapy that could boost your child's intelligence, or perhaps increase your child's body metabolism so that your child becomes a better athlete. Perhaps even to make your child prettier, cuter, fairer, taller, less black and more white, more black and less white, blonder, or have blue instead of the boring black or brown eyes. In other words, you could design your child, almost out of a catalogue.

Sounds like science fiction? Think again. Genetic engineering is never short of controversy and heated debates. Although genetic engineering is still unable to make a genetically modified human, the science is getting there. And rapidly.

Just two decades ago, people were merely talking about genetically modified animals and plants. Now, over 80% of corn, cotton, and soybean planted commercially in the US are genetically modified to be more resistant to pests and herbicides. Over 22 countries have commercially planted transgenic (or better known as genetically-modified or GM) crops and these transgenic crops cover over 81 million hectares and involve more than 8 million farmers.

Fluorescent genes can now be extracted from jellyfish and inserted into plants, cats, fish, and mice. Under black light, these plants and animals glow! And yes, there are even potatoes that glow when they don't have enough water to drink. In this way, the potatoes tell the farmers when they are water-stressed. How convenient!

Now with the human genome fully mapped, it is only time before scientists start to roll out the first transhumans or genetically enhanced humans.



Bill McKibben (Getty Images)

[Bill McKibben](#), a writer and environmentalist, is most famous for his first book "[End of Nature](#)". It is considered as the first book for the general audience that warns about global warming. Now, he has a new book out.

Entitled "[Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age](#)," Bill McKibben now warns about the genetic changes to humans, which he considers as unnatural. Germline therapy is the manipulation of genes that would alter humans to be more athletic, more intelligent, and so on. Moreover, these genetic manipulations are heritable. In other words, a transgenic couple makes a transgenic child.

I didn't agree with some of McKibben's arguments. First, McKibben argues that genetically engineering would set in stone the child's destiny. In other words, the child would be unable to choose a different path from that dictated by his or her genes. Following McKibben's argument, genetically enhanced artistic children would grow up to be musicians (perhaps like their parents), or genetically enhanced smart children are destined to be the next scientist, engineer, doctor, or lawyer.

But McKibben forgets that the human character is both a function of genes and environment. In short, both nature and nurture matter in shaping a child. A tall boy may not necessarily grow up (or wants to be) a basketball player. The same case for a predisposed smart girl who not end up working as a researcher at a university

but end up instead working with the poor in Bangladesh.

Second, McKibben also argues that a person may not enjoy the “gift” he or she has received from genetic engineering. For instance, a runner who has been genetically enhanced to run faster or have a higher stamina may feel that running did not give the same challenge, satisfaction, or joy than that obtained by a normal person. For example, if you have been genetically enhanced to run faster, completing the 100-meter dash less than nine seconds may be peanuts. Others (who have not been genetically enhanced) might huff-and-puff just to stay below 11 seconds. So where’s the joy for you? You breeze in what others struggle.

However, if you run faster, then you have raised the bar or benchmark for yourself, and you would get your challenge, satisfaction, and joy from hitting a higher target. So, although you run faster than normal folks, the “kick” you get is trying to run even faster than what your body can do, such as running the 100-meter dash under eight (not the usual nine) seconds. In the same way, a genetically enhanced scientist would get to solve even larger and more intricate problems.

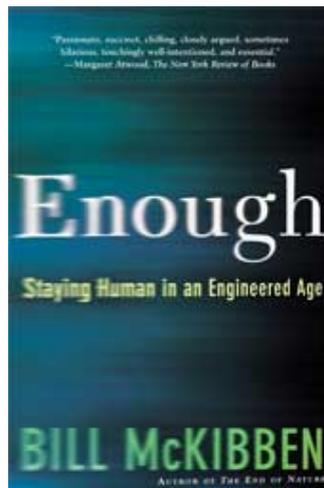
Nonetheless, McKibben has some convincing arguments that merits his book, *Enough*, as mandatory reading for intelligent folks (genetically enhanced or not). First, the use of human genetic engineering sits on a slippery slope. Once you allow its use, it becomes easier and more justified to use genetic engineering to enhance any human capabilities and characteristics. Although very few would argue against the use of genetic engineering to cure serious illnesses, many would wonder about its use in making humans taller, more beautiful, and other superficial options.

Second, it is the rich who would benefit most from genetic engineering. Consequently, the world would be divided between the Gene-Enriched (or GenRich) and Naturals. Those who have been genetically enhanced would be more advantageous and influential than those who have not been genetically enhanced. The former group (GenRich) would play a more important role in business, social, economy, and politics than those who have not received any genetic boost (Normals).

Third, even among the GenRich folks, there would be competition between the old and new versions. Because technology is always improving, you may find a situation whereby a forty-year-old manager who has been genetically enhanced,

using older technology, to be 10% smarter is soon displaced by a twenty-year-old kid who has been genetically enhanced, using newer technology, to be 25% smarter. How's that for unfair advantage?

Although *Enough* is dogged by some poor science, it did open my eyes to the danger of human genetic engineering not because it is unnatural, as Bill McKibben tries hard to convince us, but because it could cause yet another division between humans: between those who have and have not been genetically enhanced.



Enough by Bill McKibben