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## Your brain is not designed for now

Our planet is about 4.5 billion years old. We all know that humans appeared relatively recently in the grand scheme of things but it's sometimes useful to remind ourselves just how recently.

To allow us to imagine this more easily, let's condense our history into the equivalent of a single year. In January, February and March our planet is a harsh place, full of rocks and devoid of life. Life first appears on Earth in the first week of April and mostly consists of single-celled organisms. By the last week of April multi-celled organisms have started to appear and vertebrates arrive in the last week of May. By late August the first animals emerge from the sea to walk on land and by mid-September reptiles have arrived. At the end of September the first mass extinction occurs but life re-establishes itself and dinosaurs reign until the second mass extinction at the end of October. Birds and mammals arrive in the third week of November.

Humans arrive on the 31st of December at about noon. You read that correctly. Our most primitive selves arrived just in time to put up the decorations for the New Year's Eve party. By about five minutes to midnight many of the major civilisations have been established like ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. At this point we're bustling around opening the champagne and charging our glasses.

At just over a minute to midnight our modern calendar begins. We're making sure we're standing next to the person we want to kiss. At three seconds to midnight the Wright brothers fly the first plane. We're almost done with the countdown. Consumer electronics first appear at one millisecond to midnight. We're kissing and singing Auld Lang Syne. The fireworks have started.

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So yes, we arrived recently. And, whilst we know this intellectually, it feels very different to know it in our hearts. But what are the implications of our recent arrival?

One of them has to do with the fact that there are two very distinct ways that life has evolved on planet Earth. Something we rarely, if ever, think about.

The most obvious way is through genetics. Even the single celled organisms of early April had genes that transmitted the instructions that all subsequent organisms of that species used to survive and reproduce. In almost all cases, genetics takes time to pass information

from one generation to the next, which is why things moved comparatively slowly for the vast majority of our history. The exception to this is the lowly bacteria. Whilst they are still single-celled organisms, they have acquired a variety of innovative ways to exchange genes amongst individuals, and even between species, without waiting for traditional reproduction. This has allowed them to display extraordinary versatility and they now occupy almost every possible environment on Earth.

But there is another way for evolution to work that doesn't involve genetics at all. The second and far more recent way is through culture. By that I mean the ability to pass on ideas, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Before we were able to do that, genetics was the only means of evolution. But in the afternoon of 31 December all of that changed and it changed very dramatically. Suddenly, by comparison, we were able to evolve far, far more rapidly because we were no longer relying on our genes for our evolution. You might be stuck for life with the genes you were born with, but you can choose from an endless supply of new ideas that can jump from one mind to another almost instantly. If consumer electronics arrived at one millisecond to midnight, the Internet arrived even more recently and our collective knowledge now allows good (and bad) ideas to be retained, combined and analysed in new ways and built upon in another quantum leap of evolution.

What has this meant for our brains? The brain you and I were born with looks, for all intents and purposes, pretty much identical to the brain our ancient ancestors were born with about 80,000 years ago. Our genetic evolution has not, in any way, kept pace with our cultural evolution. In other words, our brains are not, even a little bit, designed for the world we have created for ourselves. They're not designed for virtual reality or social media or immersive online gaming or PowerPoint presentations or options trading. They're designed for 80,000 years ago when our biggest challenge was whether or not we were about to be eaten by a lion.

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In nearly every important respect the human brain has been shown to come into the world primed to do certain tasks. We are prepared to adopt language, to understand shapes and movement, to expect causation, to manipulate numbers and quantities, to mimic others and favour our families. So a human brain is not, as it may appear, a blank slate.

But the thing we're not prepared for is to adopt any one culture over any other. Instead, we are primed to adopt the culture into which we are born. And even though it is entirely arbitrary, a complete accident of birth, humans will show extraordinary allegiance to the culture they are born into, to the point of being prepared to die for it. In other words, we're hard-wired to belong.

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In his fascinating book, *Wired for Culture - The Natural History of Human Cooperation*, Mark Pagel, head of the Evolution Laboratory at the University of Reading in the UK makes

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the following observation: "A wolf brought up by sheep will remain a wolf and soon turn on its benefactors, but a newborn human must be ready to join any cultural group on Earth."

But what has this got to do with organisational culture? Because our brains are primed to adopt the culture into which we are born, they're also primed to adopt the culture of the groups we join throughout our lives. Our organisational group is, arguably, the second most important group we will join outside of our immediate family. And given our livelihood also depends on it, it's little wonder we're so adept at bringing our evolutionary super-powers of cultural adaptation to bear to ensure we find ways to belong to our organisational group.

Our brains are designed to be hyper-alert to the cues that tell us whether we are earning or losing belonging in the group we have joined. If you think of organisational culture as the rules of belonging in a particular group at a particular time, you can work with the brain's super-powers to shift it in the right direction.

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