

My Ishmael by Daniel Quinn is a fiction novel about a young girl who responds to newspaper article advertising a teacher seeking a pupil with the "earnest desire to save the world." The book continues to chronicle young Julie's education on environmental and social issues as Ishmael teaches her. Certain terms and concepts used throughout the book are used in the chapter selected for your reading, "Less is Not Always More."

The term "Leavers" is used to describe people who lived in a tribal, hunter-gatherer society, and conversely, "Takers" are people who developed agriculture and eventually went on to develop advanced tools and technology. All people living in industrialized societies today, and even most in developing nations are Takers.

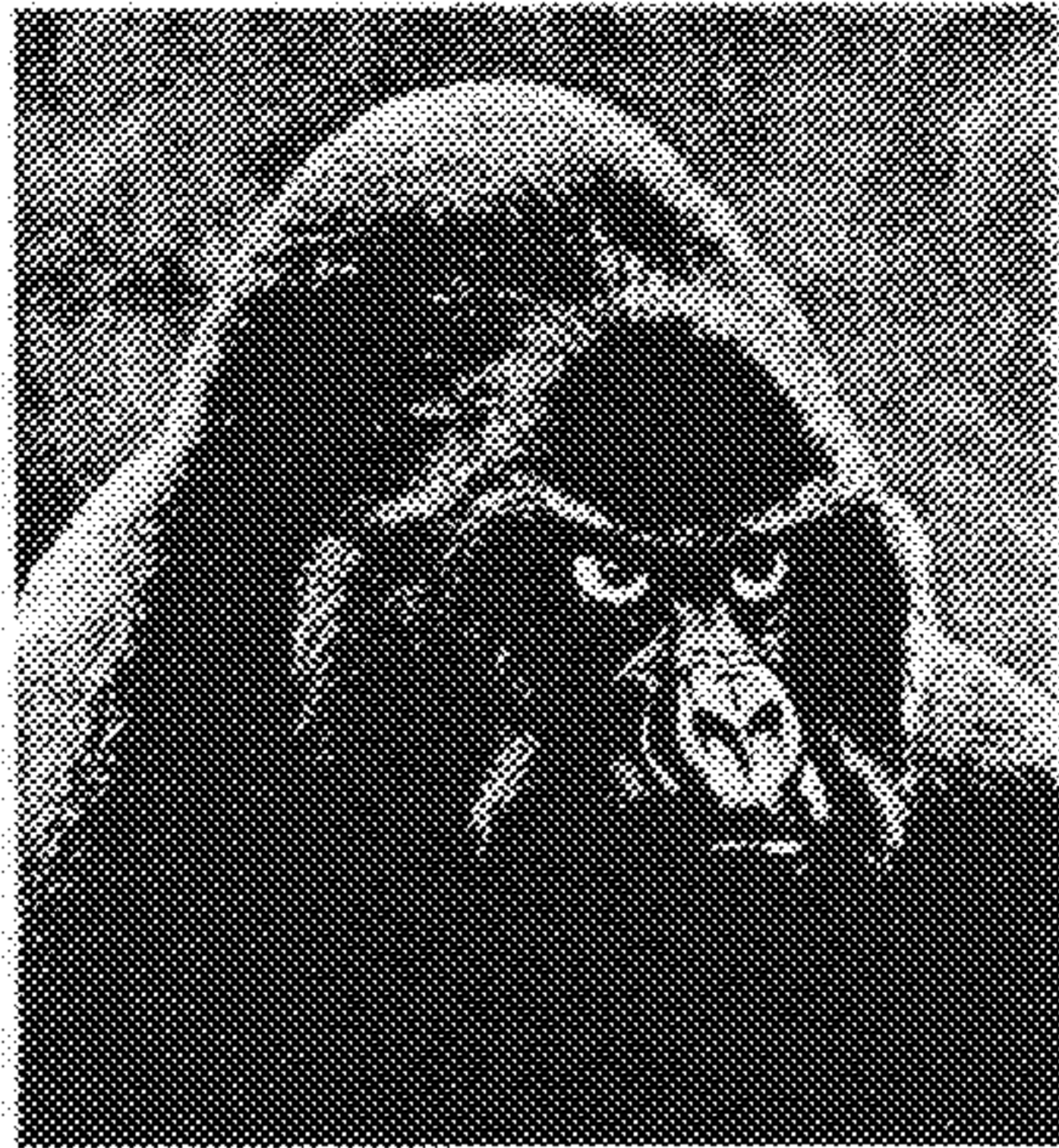
"Mother Culture" is a phrase used throughout the novel to describe the cultural ideas that have been ingrained in peoples thinking from birth. Mother Culture encompasses all the things we know without even having consciously learned them.

Keeping these terms in mind while reading "Less is Not Always More" will enhance your reading experience and hopefully allow you to obtain the most information from the chapter without having read the entire novel.

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DANIEL QUINN

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *ISHMAEL*
AND *THE STORY OF B*



MY ISHMAEL

A Sequel

THE PHENOMENON CONTINUES

Less Is NOT Always More

"Tell me what you think the world would be like if we actually did manage to 'start living a different way.'"

"This is a very legitimate request, Julie, and I can't imagine why you hesitated to make it. I know from experience that, at this point, many people imagine that I'm thinking of a future in which technology has disappeared. It's all too easy for you to blame all your problems on technology. But humans were born technologists as they were born linguists, and no Leaver people has ever been discovered that is devoid of it. Like so many other facets of Leaver life, however, their technology tends to be almost invisible to eyes used to technology as furiously powerful and extravagant as yours. In any case, I'm certainly not envisioning a future for you devoid of technology.

"Very often people who are used to thinking in the Taker way will say to me, 'Well, if the Taker way isn't the right way, what is the right way?' But of course there is no one right way for people to live, any more than there is one right way for birds to build nests or for spiders to spin webs. So I'm certainly not envisioning a future in which the Taker empire has been overthrown and replaced by another. That's complete nonsense. What does Mother Culture say you have to do?"

"Oh my," I said. "I guess she'd say we don't have to do anything at all."

He shook his head. "Listen to her, don't try to second-guess her. You mentioned one of her teachings on this subject a minute ago. Here it is: 'You have some vague and probably incurable illness; you'll never figure out exactly

what it is, but here are some cures you can try. Try this one, and if that doesn't work, try that one. And if that doesn't work, try this one.' Ad infinitum."

"Okay, I see what you mean. Let me think." I closed my eyes and after about five minutes began to get a glimmer. "This may be totally wrong," I told him. "This may just be the simple truth, but this is what I hear: 'Sure, you can save the world, but you're really going to hate it. It's really going to be painful.'"

"Why is it going to be painful?"

"Because of all the stuff we have to give up. But as I say, this may just be the simple truth."

"No, it's not the simple truth, Julie. It's Mother Culture's simple lie. Although Mother Culture is a metaphor, she really does behave uncannily like a real person sometimes. Why do you think she would tell this particular lie?"

"She wants to discourage us from changing, I guess."

"Of course. Her whole function is to preserve the status quo. This is not a peculiarity of your Mother Culture. In every culture, it's the function of Mother Culture to preserve the status quo. I don't mean at all to suggest that this is a wicked activity."

"I understand."

"Mother Culture wants to forestall you right at the outset by persuading you that, for you, any change *must* be a change for the worse. Why is it the case that *for you* any change must be a change for the worse, Julie?"

"I don't understand why you stress 'for you.'"

"Well, think about the Bushmen of Africa instead of about you. Would any change be a change for the worse for them?"

"Oh, I see what you mean. The answer is no, of course. For the Bushmen of Africa, any change would be a change for the *better*, according to Mother Culture."

"Why is that?"

"Because what they have is worthless. So any change would be an improvement."

"Exactly. And why must any change for you be a change for the worse?"

"Because what we have is perfection. It just can't get any better than this, so any change is ipso facto going to be a change for the worse. Is that right—ipso facto?"

"It's quite right, Julie. I've been surprised by how many of you actually seem to believe that what you have is perfection. It took me a while to realize that this results from the strange understanding you have of human history and of evolution. A great many of you consciously or unconsciously think of evolution as a process of inexorable improvement. You imagine that humans began as a completely miserable lot but under the influence of evolution very gradually got better and better and better and better and better and better and better and better and better and better and better until one day they became you, complete with frost-free refrigerators, microwave ovens, air-conditioning, minivans, and satellite television with six hundred channels. Because of this, giving up *anything* would necessarily represent a step backward in human development. So Mother Culture formulates the problem this way: 'Saving the world means *giving up things* and giving up things means reverting to misery. Therefore . . .'"

"Therefore forget about giving up things."

"And, more importantly, forget about saving the world."

"And what are you saying?"

"I too say 'forget about giving up things.' You shouldn't think of yourselves as wealthy people who must give up some of your riches. You should think of yourselves as people in desperate need. Do you understand the root meaning of the word *wealth*, Julie?"

"I'm not sure."

"What root word is the word *warmth* based on?"

"Warm, obviously."

"So take a guess. What root word is the word *wealth* based on?"

"Well?"

"Of course. In its root sense, *wealth* isn't a synonym for *money*, it's a synonym for *wellness*. In terms of products, you are of course fabulously wealthy, but in terms of human wealth, you are pathetically poor. In terms of human wealth, you're the wretched of the earth. And this is why you shouldn't focus on giving up things. How can you expect the wretched of the earth to give up *anything*? That's impossible. On the contrary, you must absolutely concentrate on *getting* things—but not more toasters, Julie. Not more radios. Not more television sets. Not more telephones. Not more CD players. Not more playthings. You must concentrate on getting the things you desperately need *as human beings*. At the moment you've given up on all those things, you've decided they can't be had. But my task, Julie, is to show you that this isn't the case. You don't have to give up on the things you desperately need as human beings. They're within your reach—if you know where to look for them. If you know *how* to look for them. And this is what you came to me to learn."

"But how do we *do* that, Ishmael?"

"You've got to be more demanding for yourselves, Julie—not less. This is where I part company with your religionists, who tend to encourage you to be brave and long-suffering and to expect little from life—and to expect better only in a next life. You need to demand for yourselves the wealth that aboriginal people all over the world are willing to die to defend. You need to demand for yourselves the wealth that humans had from the beginning, that they took for granted for hundreds of thousands of years. You need to demand for yourselves the wealth you threw away in order to make yourselves the rulers of the world. But you can't demand this

from your leaders. Your leaders aren't withholding it. They don't have it to give to you. This is how you must differ from revolutionaries of the past, who simply wanted different people to be running things. You can't solve your problem by putting someone new in charge."

"Yeah, but who do we demand it of if we don't demand it from our leaders?"

"Demand it of yourselves, Julie. Tribal wealth is the energy that tribal members give each other in order to keep the tribe going. This energy is inexhaustible, a completely renewable resource."

I groaned. "You're still not telling me how to *do* that."

"Julie, the things you want as humans are *available*. This is my message to you over and over and over again. You can *have* these things. People you despise as ignorant savages have them, so why can't *you* have them?"

"But *how*? How do we go *about* having them?"

"First you have to realize that it's *possible* to have them. Look, Julie, before you could go to the moon, you first had to realize that it was *possible* to go to the moon. Before you could build an artificial heart, you first had to realize that it was *possible* to build an artificial heart. Do you see that?"

"Yes."

"At the moment, Julie, how many of you realize that your ancestors had a way of living that worked very well for people? People who lived this way weren't perpetually struggling with crime, madness, depression, injustice, poverty, and rage. Wealth wasn't concentrated in the hands of a lucky few. People didn't live in terror of their neighbors or of the future. People felt secure, and they *were* secure—in a way that's almost unimaginable to you. This way of living is still extant, and it still works as well as it ever did, for people—unlike your way, which works very well for business but very badly for people. How many of you realize all this?"

"None," I said. "Or very few."

"Then how can they begin? To go to the moon, you first had to realize that it was possible to go to the moon."

"So what are you saying? That it's impossible?"

Ishmael sighed. "Do you remember what I advertised for?"

"Of course. A pupil with an earnest desire to save the world."

"Then presumably you came here because you have that desire. Did you think I was going to hand you a magic wand? Or an automatic weapon with which you could gun down all the evildoers of the world?"

"No."

"Did you think there was nothing to be done? Did you think that you would come here, listen for a while, and then go home and do nothing? Did you think that doing nothing was my idea for saving the world?"

"No."

"On the basis of what I've been saying here, Julie, what *needs* to be done? What needs to be done first before people will begin figuring out how to get the wealth they so desperately need?"

I shook my head but that wasn't nearly enough. I popped up out of my chair and windmilled my arms. Ishmael looked at me curiously, as if I might have lost my mind at last. I said to him, "Look! You're not talking about saving the world. I can't figure you out! You're talking about saving *us!*"

Ishmael nodded. "I understand your puzzlement, Julie. But here is how it is. The people of your culture are in the process of rendering this planet uninhabitable to yourselves and millions of other species. If you succeed in doing this, life will certainly continue, but at levels you (in your lofty way) would undoubtedly consider more primitive. When you and I speak of saving the world, we mean saving the world roughly as we know it now—a world populated by ele-

phants, gorillas, kangaroos, bison, elk, eagles, seals, whales, and so on. Do you understand?"

"Of course."

"There are only two ways to save the world in this sense. One of them is to destroy you immediately—not to wait for you to render the world uninhabitable for yourselves. I know of no way to accomplish that, Julie. Do you?"

"No."

"The only other way to save the world is to save you. Is to show you how to get the things you so desperately need—*instead* of destroying the world."

"Oh," I said.

"It is my bizarre theory, Julie, that the people of your culture are destroying the world not because they're vicious or stupid, as Mother Culture teaches, but because they're terribly, terribly deprived—of things that humans absolutely must have, simply cannot go on living without year after year and generation after generation. It's my bizarre theory that, given a choice between destroying the world and having the things they really, deeply want, they'll choose the latter. But before they can *make* that choice, they must see that choice."

I gave him back one of his own bleak stares. "And I'm supposed to show them that they have that choice. Is that it?"

"That's it, Julie. Isn't that what you wanted to do in your daydream? Bring enlightenment to the world from afar?"

"Yeah, that's what I wanted to do in my *daydream*, all right. But in real life, gimme a break. I'm just a kid wondering how I'm gonna make out when I finally get to high school."

"I realize that. But you're not going to remain so forever. Whether you know it or not, you came here to be changed, and you've been changed. And whether you know it or not, the change is permanent."