

Why Predators Must Pray

by Joe Bissonette (October 2016)



Among animals there are predators and prey. The first seeks and the other eludes. Obviously prey should try to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible so as to avoid the attention of predators, and yet prey often form into large groups which are easily detected. To us they symbolize happy oblivion; herds of grazing animals epitomize pastoral serenity in the romantic urban imagination, but the logic underlying herding is about as consoling as a bedtime story contrived by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes said something to the effect that one never feels as secure as when standing safe on a bluff watching a ship flounder at sea. In our zero-sum world, our own sense of well-being is in some way heightened by witnessing the hardships of others. Such is the unspoken logic of the herd. Safety in the herd is based on at least one other animal being slower, one who will fall behind when the herd is under attack and fall victim to the bloodthirsty aggression of the predator, leaving the rest safe. It's like the joke about two friends running from a bear. One stops to tie up his shoes and the other desperately asks why. The first friend replies: "I don't have to outrun the bear, I just have to outrun you."

Though we don't graze in herds and seldom run from bears, there are similarities. *The Lottery* is the most commented upon short story ever written. It begins with easy banter and more or less good humour, but also a sub-current of anxiety. Every year the town gathers and each person draws a piece of paper from a box. In turn, each unfolds his paper, holds it up and breathes a sigh of relief. Until one unfolds her paper and it reveals a black dot. She panics, claims it must be a mistake, desperately says that it must belong to her husband or one of her children. But the die is cast. With cold eyes her neighbours, friends and her own family pick up rocks and stone her to death.

Beyond pro forma inquiries about well-being and banalities about the weather, scapegoating is the most recurrent motif in our interactions. It is usually clothed in levity but the apparent lightness masks serious business. The first effect of Original Sin was Adam and Eve becoming aware that they were naked and then being ashamed. They made clothing for themselves, to mask their nakedness. They were no longer at ease with each other, and they hid from God. All of us live with this baseline anxiety, but we are predators as well as prey and we know that the best defense is a strong offense. Like the herd which offers safety through the failure of the weakest, we overcome the anxiety produced by our shame by enlisting others to join us in the persecution of some third party. The persecution of the scapegoat is the basis for alliances between us. If together we are attacking the victim, we need not fear being attacked by each other.

Schools of fish are in some ways the aquatic equivalent of herds, but in mysterious ways they are something more. They swim in the same direction in a coordinated manner. They are tightly organized, synchronized and precisely spaced. Schools undertake complicated manoeuvres as though they were a single fish. The main theory to explain schooling is similar to the logic of herding, it's called the "encounter dilution effect." A predator will only eat so much. Proportionally it will eat a smaller amount of a large grouping than of a small grouping, therefore the likelihood of a given fish surviving an attack is greater if part of a larger group. But of course this doesn't explain the fascinating synchronized movements of a school of fish which seem to represent a willful subsuming of individuality into the whole. Fish as part of a school are much more than scaled versions of Dawkin's selfish genes, only coincidentally aligned in their private pursuits of self-interest. There is something sublime

and even transcendent in the aesthetic of schooling fish or spiraling formations of birds.

And this mysteriousness appropriated by the early church which used the fish as the symbol for Christianity and the dove as the symbol for the Holy Spirit seems like a good place to reconnect Animalia with us. Schools of fish are of the same species, the same age and the same size, and this important fact, though felicitous among fish, is the single greatest problem with our schools of children, gathered, ostensibly, for education. There is no sublime aesthetic achieved through creating a monolith of children all the same age. In fact, quite the opposite. It is the perfect storm for mass psychopathology.

A recent study measured viewer responses to a picture of a human face. Almost all of the child and adult respondents identified the facial expression in the picture and either neutral or positive. But more than 70% of the teenage respondents identified the facial expression in the very same picture as negative and hostile. Teens are often neurotic. They should not be segregated from the rest of society among large groups of other teens beset by the same disorientations.

The monolithic structure of schools isolated from the wholeness found in the company of the older and the younger creates an environment where most thrive despite, rather than because of schools. The structure of the school is like a dissonant symphony; a primal sensual beat, in no way mollified by the vulnerability of young children or the nobility of adults, is overlaid with atonal lyrics which call for restraint and civility. This dissonance was most clearly illustrated at an anti-bullying assembly at the school where I taught a couple of years ago. 1400 high school students were gathered in the gym to hear fine words of tolerance, love and respect. At about midway through the hour long assembly, one student and then another gave short theatrical tableaux, acting out the despair felt by the bullied. It was a couple of months into the school year and we had not had one serious fight, but that day, after the assembly, there were three very serious fights. The theatrical tableaux gave rise to repressed upset, they were the music resonating in primal souls and they overwhelmed the thin verbal exhortations of anti-bullying. The problem with schools has of course become the problem with our whole culture, as we have become more nuclear, more myopic, and less a unified but multifaceted whole.

Some will make the case that crass materialism or the endless parade of electronic distractions can sufficiently buffer the darker regions of our souls. They might point out that society continues to function, notwithstanding the dramatic decline in religiosity. Some might even boldly assert that secularization is not merely a rejection of organized religion as evidenced by growing numbers who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” but that the God question is no longer relevant for an even more rapidly growing segment of the population who simply describe their religious affiliation as “none.” But these are the illusions of the affluent, the safe and the secure; that is, the delusional.

Our world is coming apart. The most obvious truths of maleness and femaleness are being criminalized. We are increasingly atomized, as the U.S. Census reports that for the first time in history, “single adult living alone” is the most common household type. Perpetual entertainment has left us uninspired, perpetual stimulation has left us flat, bored and boring. It was wittily said that hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue, but we are no longer hypocrites because we no longer aspire to any virtues or feel shame for any vices. That we are not a bloodthirsty mob at this minute is due to nothing more than the timing of a trigger event, something many people anticipate on the near horizon. Behind the door is the predator. And it is precisely for this reason, that we are two steps away from a religious renaissance.

Predators need to pray. Though we conservatives often quote *The Second Coming* (*Factiva* reports that lines from the poem have been quoted more often in the first seven months of 2016 than in the preceding 30 years) it is not the final word. The widening gyre awakens spiritual hunger. In the Easter Octave the Church prays *felix culpa*, or happy fault that led to our downfall, but subsequently brought redemption through Christ. The Fall occasioned greater love, greater grace from God, because we were all the more in need. And this anticipation of a coming apart, this heightened awareness of the darker undercurrents of our souls is already awakening a mustard seed renaissance. Every parish I know of has experienced a significant decrease in Sunday Mass attendance, but is also experiencing a significant increase in daily Mass attendance. There is a winnowing of witnesses as we awaken from spiritual slumber.

The Mass begins with tracing the sign of the cross over ourselves. If we are in

a Gothic church, we sit in a building shaped like a cross; we enter into the cross. The cross was the instrument of terror, torture and death but more importantly, the greatest act of love and our source of hope. It inverts the survival instinct which is our animal nature and our insecurity and cruelty which is our fallen nature. Followers of the cross must be willing to lose their lives and to live in the sure confidence of the faith as models of compassion. Jesus on the cross is forever new, forever shocking, and we relate to him not merely as an idea or an ideal, but as the omega towards which we are drawn and into which we are drawn up.

The Mass sanctifies brutal corporality as it revolves around a sacred meal. To eat is the most natural thing, but it is fundamentally shocking. To eat is also to destroy the essence of the thing eaten, animal or vegetable, to break it down to its elemental parts and appropriate it into our being. It depends upon the cycle of aggression and terror. But as Josef Ratzinger points out in *Behold the Pierced One*, through the Eucharist the creative destruction of eating, where we appropriate food into ourselves, is reversed. When we consume the Eucharist we do not destroy and appropriate, we are drawn up into Christ. All things are transformed. We become Tabernacles of The Lord and the beatitudes supplant survival of the fittest. Christianity utterly transforms everything, especially the tragic. And the Mass is not just an idea, it is the most sublime enactment, the most thoroughgoing existential engagement possible.

We are deeply conflicted. In Genesis 2 we are made from soil, the lowest thing – waste, rot, decay- and the breath of God, which as the medium of The Word is the very stuff of God. There is no part of us that is without corruption, but neither is there any corruption which does not point to redemption. We are predators who must pray.

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