

BIODIVERSITY SUNDAY

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Six years ago when Jacquie and I were meeting with you to explore if I would become your minister, among Jacquie's prime interests was the zoo. The first chance she got, she walked there. She is a walker, but I was still struck that she could walk from the Zoo to St. John's. Since then we have taken out a Family Membership. If we had our druthers, would visit the zoo several times a week. Our first interest was the red pandas, then the gibbons, then the Siberian lynx. Most recently, I have been taken with the shrine to the last passenger pigeon Martha, and the last Carolina parakeet, Incas. The Siberian Lynx spends his days gazing out on the statue of Martha which is at the entrance to the pagoda which relates the story of Incas and Martha. The statue of Martha is on the cover of your Order of Worship.

Passing through Kentucky in 1813 John James Audubon, the eminent naturalist and bird artist spoke of a mass migration of passenger pigeons, "the air was literally filled with pigeons; the light of noonday was obscured as by an eclipse." For three days the pigeons poured out of the Northeast in search of forests bearing nuts and acorns. By Audubon's estimate, the flock that passed overhead contained more than 1 billion birds, a number consistent with calculations by other ornithologists. As the pigeons approached their roost, Audubon noted that the noise they made "reminded me of a hard gale at sea passing through the rigging of a close-reefed vessel." [Bruce A Stein, PRECIOUS HERITAGE, PAGE 93.]

Passenger Pigeons lived in a part of America where humans also wanted to live. Farm crops became a substitute food supply, making Passenger Pigeons a locust-like threat to farmers. Since Passenger Pigeons only lived in huge flocks, they were easy to kill in staggering numbers. In 1878, a flock of Passenger Pigeons in Michigan were shot and clubbed to death at a rate of 50,000 birds a day, every day, for nearly five months.

The last pigeon to go was "Martha" -- named for Martha Washington -- who fell off of her perch and died in 1914 at the advanced age of 29 in the Cincinnati Zoo.

I am struck by how we have here in Cincinnati this symbol of what we as humans are doing to the ecology which gave birth to us on our planet. Passenger pigeons were not just some isolated creature that could be gotten rid of. Passenger pigeons, just as are dogs and cats, spiders, snakes and human beings, we are all part of the interdependent web of all existence, as we say in the 7th principle. The passenger pigeon played an important role in the ecological web. With the pigeons gone in the early 1900's, their primary food, acorns, began to flourish. Shortly thereafter, the population of deer and mice, which also subsist on acorns, began to explode as did the ticks these animals carry. Scientists now directly link the disappearance of the passenger pigeon to the spread of Lyme disease. Biodiversity, respect for the independent web, is not only a matter of aesthetics, of earth

based spirituality; it's also a matter of humbly recognizing our true place in the order of things

There were consequences of removing passenger pigeons from the interdependent web. Often, people think they can neglect that human beings are of part of the web. An aspect of respecting the diversity of plants and animals is also seeing within that diversity a sameness. With all species, plants and animals, we are made up of cells that have DNA molecules controlling chemicals pathways. With many animals, we have nervous systems, brains as do snakes and panda bears. Most of us can identify with the bonobo who holds her child, the lazy gorilla napping, and the snarling lynx defending her territory.

When we start comparing ourselves to animals, saying that humans are animals, there are connotations of human beings as savages, barbarians. We all know, 'animals are violent.' Right? If animals are violent, does that mean human beings are inherently violent? Perhaps one of the reason people avoid thinking of humans as animals is to avoid coming to terms with inherent violent impulses.

But we know human beings are violent. Just go south a few miles to Big Bone Lick, KY, State Park. There you can read the story of the extinction of the great mammals in North America: mammoths and mastodon disappeared with the coming of the first human beings on the North American continent. This is August, the time we recall the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the early 1920's, my Father lived for a year and a half in Nagasaki, so each August 9th I think of him, and the home he lived in, now gone.

There is of course a lot of reading you could do on the biological roots of human violence. One of the more interesting books I have come across is Barbara Oakley's, "EVIL GENES; Why Rome Fell, Hitler rose, Enron Failed and My Sister Stole My Mother's boy Friend."

Oakley's mother always wanted to go to Paris. In her mid-80's a boy friend, elderly like her self with oxygen tank, promised to take her. Excited, she called her daughters. Barbara's sister packed her bags, moved into an apartment next to her mother, which also it turned out was next to the mother's boy friend, flashed a few smiles, and was off to Paris with their Mother's boy friend. Of course, on returning, that was the end of that.

Why, Barbara wondered, did her sister do that? She shares her research with us. Psychopaths, she tells us, brain imaging has shown have low functioning in the brain area where emotions go on, and high activity in intellectual areas, where supposedly they are compensating for their lack of empathy. People with borderline personality disorder show different brain imagery, 'normal' people just going 'yuck' when seeing road kill, while those with the disorder, show a great deal of activity and being upset by road kill.

Barbara Oakley's sister also had biological factors affecting her behavior. Oakley is very good, I think, in pointing out that both genetics and environmental factors need to be taken into consideration. Environmental factors were important when in Romania they

were overwhelmed with orphans and none of the infants were ever picked up and hugged. They were left permanently damaged. Genetic factors may also be in play, as research with identical twins has shown that genes are active in development of psychopaths.

With her sister, Barbara tells us she developed polio at the age of three. The genetic part of that is that in order to get the virus, a person needs to have a genetic predisposition. Then, everyone who has polio suffers damage to a part of the brain called the reticular formation. This is the brain area that controls attention. How it manifests is different for each person, but in Barbara's sister, it meant out of sight, out of mind. Her sister disappeared for ten years. Then one day she called their father, asking for the money to fly home. Shortly thereafter, she called again asking for the money to fly back. He sent her money. The third time he sent the air plane ticket.

When she arrived home, she hugged everybody, had an hour long talk with Barbara, and then went to the store. They didn't see her again for five years. She met a man at the store. Barbara was out of sight, the man was in front of her. Her brain damage from the polio meant out of sight out of mind. Oakley gives interesting reflections on Hitler, Slobodan Milošević and Bill Clinton.

Apparently Oakley began her research after her sister mysteriously died. Living with someone in your family who is out of control is difficult, "crazy making." Often we don't know what to make of it. Oakley was not aware of the damage to her sister's brain until well after the damage to family relationships.

When someone we love is acting in high risk ways, we often don't know why. Biological factors may be the case. Maybe not. When my step-son was threatening to kill me, I didn't challenge him on it. Neither did I push for deeper explanations at that point, as it would have aggravated the problem, most likely.

Because of the ambiguities in why people may be acting disruptively, I will often frame questions hypothetically. For example, what would you do if a drunk walked into the room with a gun? The people in the Knoxville UU congregation did not know they had an out-of-control person amongst them until he started shooting. But if a person is clearly heavily intoxicated, we know that trying to reason with them is an exercise in futility. And trying to reason with Jim Adkisson three weeks ago in Knoxville would have been an exercise in futility.

What has struck me in this tragedy in Knoxville is Adkisson's history of violence that has come to light. His wife, Lisa, filed for an Order of Protection in 2000. Adkisson's threats of domestic violence preceded his killings at the Knoxville church. It may be that he displaced his rage at life first onto his wife, then onto the congregation.

Threats of domestic violence and abuse seem to be an indicator of future violence that may be acted out elsewhere as well as home. Our society has yet to find a way of acting on clear evidence of danger from members of our society, having to wait until actual damage has been done. This is a form of terrorism.

We want here at St. John's, as at every church, to provide a safe environment. Indeed, a sanctuary. We can be sure they wanted to at the Knoxville UU Church. As I say this I am very much aware of our commitment to peacemaking. It seems that when I combine the subjects of nonviolence and church safety, people think I have gone off the deep end, as if I were to try to reason with a drunk.

Just because a person is a possible threat, does not mean he or she does not have inherent worth and dignity. Just because someone has lost control of themselves does not mean she or he has gone beyond the bounds of our compassion. It also doesn't mean we have lost our intelligence. A peacemaking approach to church safety means that we keep in mind our values as we develop an emergency preparedness plan. It means that we do not forget we are first called to be a welcoming congregation. That is why we are here. If our fears were to blind us, and safety became more important than compassion, we would need to ask, why are we here? I invite you to a conversation on this topic on Wednesday, August 27th here at St. John's

And here again I think biodiversity gives us some hope. If biodiversity helps us understand violence, it also helps us comprehend empathy. Empathy is hard wired to some extent. We see it wandering about the zoo, watching animals care for young. The Cincinnati zoo does a lot to address endangered species. We see empathy across species at the Nursery near the Children's Zoo. You can watch Mashka, a mother cat, nurture infant mammals.

More than that, the zoo is a great revelation when it comes to human diversity. I think our Zoo is a great place for people watching. One of my favorite moments was at the elephant show when the keeper was talking about giving the elephants their Hollywood bath. In attendance were a number of youth wearing tee shirts identifying them as deaf. It was fascinating watching the signer with a very straight face sign the accounting of the keeper, as first he welcomed the deaf students, then talked about the elephants squirting and peeing into the pond. What made it doubly fascinating was the interest in the deaf of a young Amish woman. She had on a checkered dress and white cap, and was taking pictures of the deaf signer with a digital camera. It was an amazing snapshot of different kinds of diversity: biological and cultural.

Never have I seen so many Amish families as at the Zoo. It is fascinating for me to see the different families. They seem to each have the different colored shirts that identify them as belonging to one clan or another. Some speak English, others German. I was delighted one day to see a young Amish family walking up towards the former giraffe house. The mother had on the white cap the woman wear and he the straw hat, and their usual dress. In front of them were a young boy and girl, about seven or eight, identically dressed as their parents, with the young girl pushing a baby carriage.

Whenever I see the Amish, I remember the gift of grace and forgiveness which they gave our nation. In October 2nd, 2006, in an Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines,

Pennsylvania five girls were shot dead and five wounded. On the anniversary a year later, the Nickel Mines community released a statement:

"The Amish do not wish publicity for doing what Jesus taught and want to make sure that glory is given to God for that witness...forgiveness is a journey... you need help from your community and from God...to make and hold on to a decision to not become a hostage to hostility. It is understood that hostility destroys community. The strength of community in Nickel Mines helps the families cope with this event that changed their lives forever. Sharing their experiences with family and friends in the church community through frequent visiting and repeated conversation, along with constantly available help in their work and other needs, are essential components of the healing process "

<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/10052007/profile4.html>

If we keep in mind our shared humanity with these good people. If we keep in mind our shared humanity with those not as good. If we keep in mind our shared biological nature with all creatures, great and small, on this planet, the gifts of grace and forgiveness, hope and peace, can be ours as well.

In the words of Charles Darwin,

If we choose to let conjecture run wild, then animals, our fellow brethren in pain, disease, suffering, and famine – our slaves in the most laborious works, our companions in our amusements – they may partake of our origins in one common ancestor – we may be all melted together.

The gift of biodiversity is life, is hope. Let us cherish this great gift and pass it on to each and all.