

The Primitive Brain

Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
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Ancient Witness: Genesis 3:6-7, 22-24

Today I'd like to talk about human nature from both a scientific and religious perspective. What does it mean to be a human being?

Evidence from molecular biology indicates that African chimpanzees and gorillas share more than 99 percent of their DNA with that of human beings (which would be comparable to the genetic kinship of horses and zebras). This evidence and fossil discoveries have led scientists to conclude that human beings and modern apes descended from common ancestors.

Some 4 million years ago, an apelike creature was walking around on two legs. In Ethiopia, Donald Johnson found the bones of a short female, who they called Lucy. She walked on two legs but had long arms and a brain size like that of the apes, while her teeth show that she was a meat eater. It appears that the move from trees to grassland encouraged upright posture and a shift to hunting, long before the development of a larger brain.

Homo habilis, who was discovered by Louis Leakey, lived over 2 million years ago, had a larger brain and chipped stones to make primitive tools. Homo erectus, about 1.6 million years ago, had a much larger brain, lived in long-term group sites, made more complicated tools and probably used fire. Forms of Homo sapiens were in Europe 500,000 years ago. The Neanderthals were in Europe 100,000 years ago. Cromagnons made paintings on cave walls 30,000 years ago. Agriculture goes back only 10,000 years. The earliest known writing, Sumerian, is 6,000 years old. The biblical patriarchs began 4,000 years ago. The exodus from Egypt was in 1280 BCE or about 3,000 years ago. Techniques for melting metal brought first the Bronze Age and then the Iron Age about 3,000 years ago. Theologian Ian Barbour wrote:

The human brain itself incorporates this long history. At the base of our brains are the oldest structures, which we share with reptiles and birds; they control respiration, the cardiovascular system, and instinctive behavior, which is rigidly programmed genetically. The midbrain or limbic system, which we share with animals, controls our hormones and emotional life (pleasure, fear, sex, hunger, and so forth). The outer layer or neocortex, which is prominent in higher mammals and humans, controls perceptual, cognitive and communicative processes. The neocortex makes possible more complex forms of language, learning and intelligence.

He concludes that both science and the biblical tradition see humanity as part of nature, but a unique part. Despite the presence of unconscious impulses, we are capable of rational reflection and intellectual creativity. Despite the constraints of genes and culture, we are able to take responsibility for moral choices.

Several people have been able to integrate the biblical view of human nature and morality with an evolutionary understanding of the universe. One of them is Rabbi Harold Kushner. His reading of Genesis 3, which has been commonly called “The Fall” in Christian theology, is a story “not of Paradise Lost but of Paradise Outgrown, not of Original Sin but of the birth of Conscience.” He wrote:

The account of Adam and Eve eating the great of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, as I see it, is a mythical description of how the first human beings left the world of animal existence behind and entered the problematic world of being human. It is the biblical account of evolution, seeing the difference between humans and animals in moral rather than in anthropological terms.

Here is what he means: Human life is much more complex and complicated than animal life because we are alert to the moral dimension of the choices we make. The more authentically human we are, the more complicated our lives become. Animals don’t have to make moral decisions. When it comes to killing for food, when it comes to mating, when it comes to protecting their young or sending them off on their own, animals are driven by instinct. Human beings, having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, find these issues much more complicated.

And so, with this increased complexity there is good news and there is bad news. On one hand, we can feel love, joy, hope, achievement, faithfulness and creativity in ways that animals do not. On the other hand, we can also feel loss, anxiety, frustration, jealousy and betrayal at levels animals will never know.

I was listening to a lecture by author Gabor Maté, who said that in this society it’s common to say that if someone is being greedy, selfish, dishonest, or manipulative we say, “Oh, that’s just human nature.” But interestingly, if someone’s being generous, giving and kind, we never say “Oh, that’s just human nature.” What we consider to be human nature is very much conditioned by the society we live in. (*The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness and Healing in a Toxic Culture*, 2022) For we are a species great potential for good and bad, capable of heinous violence but also of selfless love.

I agree with Kushner that the story of the Garden of Eden is *not* a story of the Fall of Humanity, but of the Emergence of Humankind. It is a story not of regression or slipping backward to a more imperfect state; this a a story of progression and ascent. He wrote:

It is a story of the first human beings graduating, evolving from the relatively uncomplicated world of animal life to the immensely complicated world of being human and knowing that there is more to life than eating and mating, that there are such things as Good and Evil.

Someone once asked Charles Darwin whether there was still anything unique about the human being, and he answered, “Man is the only animal that blushes.”

Before they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, the story-teller makes a point of telling us that they were as naked as the rest of the animals, and like the animals, felt no shame. But once they rose above the animal level, they gained a sense of self-consciousness, a sense of being held to a standard that no animal is. Even as dogs can hear high pitched tones that we cannot, we hear cries of conscience to which animals are deaf. It was not so much that being naked was immoral, but that a person with a sense of morality knows the feeling of being scrutinized and judged.

And so human beings are creatures capable of recognizing the gap between what they are and what they can be expected to be, and of being embarrassed by that gap. We are the animal that blushes, and that makes our lives more complicated. So guilt and shame are part of the human experience. Psychiatrist Willard Gaylin writes,

Shame and guilt are necessary for the development of some of the most elegant qualities of human potential... They are not useless emotions. They signal to us that we have transgressed codes of behavior which we personally want to attain.

If we are the only creatures that blush, then a typical person cannot feel shame is less than completely human, not realizing a basic potential.

J. B. Pritzker, the Governor of Illinois, gave an interesting commencement address at Northwestern University last year. And he said that if you want to be successful in this world, you have to learn how to spot idiots. The best way, he said, is to “look for the person who is cruel.”

When we see someone who doesn't look like us, or sound like us, or act like us, or love like us, or live like us – the first thought that crosses almost everyone's brain is rooted in either fear or judgment or both. That's evolution. We survived as a species by being suspicious of things we aren't familiar with.

In order to be kind, we have to shut down that animal instinct and force our brain to travel a different pathway. Empathy and compassion are evolved states of being. They require the mental capacity to step past our most primal urges.

This may be a surprising assessment because somewhere along the way in the last few years, our society has come to believe that weaponized cruelty is part of some well-thought-out master plan.

Cruelty is seen by some as an adroit cudgel to gain power. Empathy and kindness are considered weak. Many important people look at the vulnerable only as rungs in a ladder to the top.

I'm here to tell you that when someone's path through this world is marked with acts of cruelty, they have failed the first test of an advanced society. They never forced their animal brain to evolve past its first instinct. They never forged new mental pathways to overcome their own instinctual fears. And so, their thinking and problem solving will lack the imagination and creativity that the kindest people have in spades.

Over my many years in politics and business, I have found one thing to be universally true – the kindest person in the room is often the smartest.

I agree with Pritzker. From both scientific and religious perspectives, in order to be both more intelligent and kinder we need to use the pathways to our more developed brain. Because when we're controlled just by our primitive brain, we are controlled by fear. And we respond with fighting or fleeing, with violence, selfishness and greed. Fear makes one an idiot. And it also makes

us susceptible to being manipulated by autocratic and cruel leaders. We are seeing too much of this! Gabor Maté wrote,

Neuroimaging studies have shown that the amygdala, the tiny almond-shaped brain structure that mediates fear, is larger in people with more rightwing views. It is more active in those favoring strong protective authority and harboring a suspicion of outsiders and of people who are different.

So we must move beyond the primitive brain. Constantly. Mindfully. This is a continual choice. The great preacher William Sloane Coffin put it like this:

As I see it, the primary religious task these days is to try to think straight... You can't think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth. A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind.

Look, as human beings we have evolved from a state of instinct into the knowledge of good and evil. As a species, we have moved into a higher state of consciousness and awareness. But we are not done evolving.

In Jesus and other spiritual masters, we see an even greater level of awareness; we see a higher level of evolution; we see true humanity realizing its potential; we see someone who was fully alive to the world; we see someone living in relatedness to all people and things; and in Jesus, we see someone awake to the presence of the Sacred.

What I'm talking about is a mystical experience which is the path of paradise. Not the mythical paradise from which the first humans were expelled, that would be regression. Rather this paradise is the awareness that God is always "walking in the garden" with us, that we are never separated. This paradise is the experience of oneness with God and the Universe.

For the sake of our brothers and sisters, for the sake of our species, for the sake of the planet, may we continue to overcome our primitive fearfulness and evolve to higher levels of intelligence and kindness.