

The Evolution of Compassion

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Among the more forgettable movies of 2010 thus far has been “Wall Street 2: Money Never Sleeps.” It is of course the sequel to the first “Wall Street” directed by Oliver Stone in the 1980s. It is in the original movie that Gordon Gekko, played by Michael Douglas, says, “Greed is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit.” The fact that those words are unforgettable, speaks to how well they captured the times in which they were spoken. 80s were a time of decadence and self-centeredness; sort of the Roaring 20s all over again with better music but worse hairstyles.

The 80s were tough on where I grew up; southeast Michigan. A lot of the problems the big three automakers are having now started with trends that began in the late 70s and into the 80s. Back then they faced stiff competition from Japanese automakers like Honda and Toyota both around price and car design. The big three were losing big time. In part because while GM was cranking out Jeeps for the US Army in Vietnam,

Japan and Germany were innovating in cars. Their cars were cheaper and ran better. The laws of economics put American car companies at a big competitive disadvantage.

To overcome this they pioneered a strategy that we have seen all too often in the three decades since. They moved plants to Mexico where labor was cheap. Rather than actually making a better car, the auto industry focused exclusively on their bottom line. Stockholders and executives were happy. People living in my neck of the woods had their lives devastated. Whole towns in Michigan basically dried up and have never come back.

My Mom's cousin was one of the many who suddenly lost her job on the factory line. A feisty woman, she could kick up a real fuss on anything she was passionate about. She was even on TV. "60 Minutes" was following up on the movie Roger and Me and devoted their main segment to interviewing her. She described to them, that what was lost was not merely auto plants, but lives. My cousin detailed how she had lost both her livelihood and her sense of purpose and self-identity. There was pride in the work she did. It was part of her. How can the thing you have done your whole life, given your sweat and time to doing your best, be quantified in the company's, or in the nation's, bottom line? Where is regard for the common good? What made this happen?

As religious people we must ask the religious questions that are at the heart of this tale. Is humanity driven only by competition over scarce resources? Must my economic prosperity and security always come at the expense of another? This dog-eat-dog view of humanity has deep roots. Hobbes said that early life was “nasty, brutish, and short.” Our relationships with others was always tinged by a mean, and often violent, struggle for food, water, and safety. Thus life for early man was “red in tooth and claw” as Hobbes put it. This explains Gordon Gekko’s assertion that greed is part of our evolution.

Hobbes was a philosopher, but evolution is a biological fact. Social Darwinism picks up on a number of Hobbes’ theories and marries them to Darwin in ways that the originator of evolutionary theory never agreed with. Science is the modern arbiter of truth, just as the church was in a previous era. So it is possible to ask “Is greed good?” or to put it another way, “Was greed part of our evolution, our bio-social make up as human beings?” A number of scientific disciplines ranging from anthropology, to zoology look at the behavior of nomadic native people, or the behavior of other animals who are supposed to be “red in tooth and claw” to see if real life actually conforms to these theories.

According to primatologist Frans de Waal the answer is “no”, and in fact quite the opposite is true. Compassion, empathy, and being helpful to others are behaviors far more common in the animal and human world than brutish and violent competition between animal peers.

This is not to say that all animals are nice to each other and there is no competition between them. Obviously there is. De Waal's point is merely that competition is just a sliver of the picture. There is a lot more to the story. Speaking of the human impulse to help each other after 9/11, de Waal writes:

“These reflexes go back to the deepest, most ancient layers of our brain, layers that we share with many animals, not just mammals. Look how fish, such as herring, swim in schools that tighten instantly when a shark or porpoise approaches. Or how schools turn abruptly in one silvery flash, making it impossible for the predator to target any single fish. Schooling fish keep very precise individual distances, seek out companions of the same size, and perfectly match their speed and direction, often in a fraction of a second. Thousands of individuals thus act almost like a single organism. Or look at how birds, such as starlings, swarm in dense flocks that in an instant evade an approaching hawk.”

Many animals take a very interesting adaptive approach. When trouble comes along, they stick together even more tightly than before. Surely the aftermath of 9/11 demonstrated this happens among us humans too. In many Middle Eastern and African cultures Westerners are often struck by the level of hospitality they receive. This is because in harsh climates, you take care of strangers who come to your home. To not do so would be to leave them to the elements; in essence a death sentence.

So when a stranger knocks on your door you welcome them and help them. We are all in this together, is the attitude. When faced with a crisis different groups band together. Even the clearest example of a place where life is nasty brutish and short, south central Los Angeles, saw rival gangs, the Bloods and the Crips, come together in peace following the LA riots in 1992. Albeit temporary, the two groups even wore each other's colors for a few precious months of solidarity in the face of violence and common crisis.

Thus even the most violent and deeply competitive groups in the world are capable of transcending their differences. There is more of an evolutionary advantage in coming together and helping others particularly when times are difficult. In fact just such an occasion occurred in early America, and we will be celebrating it this Thursday. For the Pilgrims who survived the trip to the new world, the first year in their colony was hell on earth. They were starving and dying of disease. The local Native Americans, so the story goes, taught them how to grow crops that would survive the winter and how to fish and hunt the local game. Following the next winter, the Pilgrims celebrated with their Native neighbors in gratitude for helping them survive.

Now I am sure there are elements to this that are not 100% historically accurate, and surely there is a Thanksgiving Fundamentalist or two out there, who would correct the version we all learned in school. That caveat aside, it is interesting to note that we refer to this holiday as

“Thanksgiving.” Surely the Pilgrims had much to be thankful for. Gratitude is an undisputed virtue. But to call this “Thanksgiving” sees these events entirely through the eyes of the Pilgrims. What of the Native Americans? Here are some strange looking people, wearing strange looking clothes, talking some strange language, and they can’t even fend for themselves. How did the Native Americans react? They most assuredly did not try to build a wall to keep out the illegal immigrants to their land. Instead, they helped them. They went to these strange new people who were obviously suffering, and shared some of their practical wisdom with them. They probably saved the Pilgrims’ lives. Perhaps they would celebrate “Compassion-giving” rather than “Thanks-giving.” The Native American’s reaction was not competition or fighting over resources. It was to share resources, because that is what you do. Compassion is an instinct, and it comes out at the right time and place.

As some of you may know, I was recently in the St. Louis area for about a week as part of my ministerial study group. Actually we were in the wilderness ourselves, in an old WPA lodge north of Grafton, Illinois right on the banks of the Illinois River. On the first night, our group shares dinner together in the big dining room. I was catching up with old friends and meeting a few new ones, when an elderly gentleman behind me fell out of his chair. My back was turned, so I don’t really know what happened, but apparently he had an inner ear problem and he

just rolled onto the floor with a thud. I turned around and saw him laying there, his wife aghast and looking a bit frail herself. I quickly turned around, went down to get him and asked if he would like help getting up. He said, "Well yes, I fell on the floor!" It seemed an obvious question to me too, but I wanted to be sure. So I picked him up under his arms, and gently got him back in his chair. When he seemed to be alright, I went back to my seat and resumed eating my salad, and tried to pick up the conversation.

Actually there wasn't a conversation to go back to. My whole table had been watching me! They had shocked looks on their faces. They were all so impressed that I helped this man. Actually I think they were impressed by the speed with which I came to his aid. There was no hesitation, he was down, and I was by his side. I think that is because I have little ones at home. My oldest son is four and a half and my youngest son just started walking about six months ago. It is not uncommon for people in my house to fall down. As a matter of fact, it happens all of the time. Little kids slip, run too fast, push each other down. Or Mom and Dad don't see the toy on the floor, trip and fall. A moment's pause revealed to me that I spend a good deal of my time away from church helping somebody get up after they have fallen down. It is now second nature to me.

The man came up to me after his dinner was over and was profusely thankful. He said he didn't really have anything to give me (I

wasn't expecting him to) but he handed me a Swiss Army knife in gratitude for my help to him. From his point of view, he needed to do some act, some symbol of gratitude toward me for my help. To me it was just what I do: I pick people up when they fall down. Compassion is instinctual.

Indeed the Buddha makes this very point in our ancient reading this morning. Compassion is not what we do to please God or our parents or to win karmic brownie points. Who knows, you might do all of those things by being compassionate, but that is beside the point. We are compassionate because that is who we are. Compassion is a fundamental part of humanity. Granted, some of us are better at hiding it or burying the compassion that resides in our heart, but it is there waiting to come out. Compassion is the concrete expression of our deep-in-our-bones understanding that we are connected to each other. That is why folks who live in harsh environments are so hospitable. Sure to them it might just be what we do as part of our day to day living. But what it really is, is an expression of our true nature—compassion. When we show compassion, when we help another person who is in distress or suffering, then we are living out the best part of ourselves. We are making love come to life.

Earlier I referenced a movie about greed, so let me mention one about compassion. This movie is not so forgettable; in fact it is on everyone's mind right now—Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. By

way of full disclosure I did not see it this opening weekend, so my remarks are really more about the book than the recent movie. It is in Deathly Hallows that we learn that the teacher Harry has hated the most, Professor Snape, had a schoolboy crush on Harry's mother Lily when they were both students together. At one point Snape confesses this to Professor Dumbledore, with a great deal of embarrassment. Snape is a kind of bad boy, wannabe tough guy. The fact that he was in love with a girl supposedly below his station in life, might make him look soft or not as hardcore as the other villains whom he was spying on.

After Snape's confession Dumbledore asks him, "Why are you ashamed of the best part of yourself?" The best part of ourselves is the part that loves. It is the part that reaches out to someone who needs help, whether they are a stranger newly arrived from the ocean, or a man who has fallen on the floor while eating dinner. The impulse to reach out and help is natural to us. It is encoded into who we are.

So this Thursday when you sit down around the table, heavy laden with turkey and cranberry sauce, remember it is a day to give thanks. There are so many blessing that so many of us are so fortunate to have in our lives. I often tell myself how I surely did not deserve to have it so good here in this church as your minister. But I want you to also remember the lesson our Native American brothers and sisters might have taken away from that celebration—it is good to be good to people. Compassion is a key part of our basic humanity. It is an expression of

our best self, our most natural self. This is a good thing to bear in mind as you contemplate hurling a dinner roll as if it were a missile to your annoying uncle across the table. We have all been there. Just breathe and smile, and eat the roll. It's what the Native Americans would have done.

May we be grateful for all our blessings this holiday season. May we show compassion without hesitation and kindness without seeking reward. For as our brothers and sisters have shown us many times over again, greed is not good, but love is the best part of who we are. Amen
Blessed Be.