

Wednesday May 16, 2012

Exploring evolutionary dead ends

By Jim Taylor

The hummingbirds are back. Probably two pair of them, although I'm not quick enough to identify individual features.

They seem to play, like otters, for the sheer joy of living. They perform aerobatics overhead that would make a stunt pilot green with envy. They soar vertically, flip over, dive at dizzying speeds, zoom past at low altitude, do barrel rolls, meet in mid air, come to an instant stop...

I also notice they have different feeding habits. One regular visitor perches on our hummingbird feeder while sipping nectar. Another hovers constantly while dipping his (or her) beak into the plastic blossom. For each bird, always the same blossom, always the same perch.

And I wonder which bird is headed down an evolutionary dead end.

A one-way street

Because evolution is a one-way street. It moves in only one direction – towards intelligence, from simple to complex, towards greater flexibility and adaptability to the environment. I can't think of any examples of evolution moving backwards – although I must admit I sometimes wonder about the California quail that scuttle across the road in front of my car.

Generally speaking, creatures that cannot change and adapt will die out. Or get trapped in an evolutionary cul de sac while the rest of the world marches on.

A snap judgement might suggest that the perching hummingbird has an advantage. Obviously, hovering requires more energy than perching. If both birds sip the same number of calories, the hovering bird must use up more of those calories before returning to its nest than the perching bird.

Economic calculations, therefore, seem to favour the perching bird.

On the other hand, the habit of staying still while feeding might make the perching hummingbird more vulnerable to predators.

So which hummingbird derives an evolutionary advantage?

Keeping options open

Snap judgements are equally unreliable in human behaviour. Given a choice between having power and being powerless, between strength and vulnerability, few humans would hesitate. We'd choose power.

Being vulnerable, after all, makes you, well, vulnerable.

So let's compare, say, Jesus Christ and Genghis Khan. Try to set aside the usual moral and religious biases that automatically treat Jesus as the ultimate model for human behavior. Which lifestyle has more lasting influence?

Jesus' prime human characteristic, it seems to me, was his vulnerability. He had no army. He bore no weapons. He refused even to defend himself against accusations.

And look where it got him – crucified.

In that light, power would seem a preferable option. Even those who profess to follow Jesus – with a few exceptions – rarely seem reluctant to seize power when they have the chance.

But I also notice that people with power seem incapable of letting it go. Of letting themselves be vulnerable. They cannot ask for help, they cannot accept help, because that would be a sign of weakness.

It's almost as if, by grabbing the brass ring with one hand, they disable the other hand. Along with the full range of their emotions. And perhaps their ability to see any perspective but their own.

Power narrows their options.

Which makes them less able to adapt. Less flexible.

Which puts Genghis and his kin at an evolutionary disadvantage, doesn't it?

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YOUR TURN

I don't think I have ever had as many letters in response to a column as I did for the column about weeds, last week. I don't keep records – but I do know that this time 19 people wrote.

Some of you just expressed appreciation. And some sent along more-or-less similar items gleaned from the Internet, especially one in which God lamented the suburbanite's obsession with planting, watering, fertilizing, cutting, and composting the perfectly weedless lawn.

Here's a selection of other responses.

"Dandelions?" scoffed Jean Hamilton. "Piece of cake! But anyone who doesn't believe the ground is cursed has never had GOUTWEED! By the way, Jim, God didn't invent Roundup; that was the other guy. You have been led astray by the false profits...er, prophets -- darn Freudian slips! -- of Monsanto."

"It's so good to have all that finally figured out!" wrote Wayne Irwin.

Clive Simpson offered a definition and a question: "If the definition of a weed is: 'something growing where humans don't want it,' why blame God? It's almost like the 'European starling' that someone deliberately imported to North America because they missed them."

I've heard that it was a misguided attempt to ensure that North America had all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare. Rather like my ancestors in southern Ontario, who imported the Scotch thistle, because my great^{nth}-grandmother missed them.

Charles Hill noted that "weed" has other meanings than dandelions: "It is perhaps the best pain medicine that God created but illegal in Texas and other righteous states.

"A 'weed,' by the way, is any plant growing in the wrong place. I love being a 'weed' in fundamentalist circles. How often, in an attempt to pull up the 'weeds' in our lives, do we throw away something valuable?"

Having just moved, John Clinton was in a mood for inexplicable questions: "As for why God created the mosquito - that question has 'bugged' me for years. Maybe it's to show that He/She has a sense of humor. Another of life's mysteries -- why do we move so much 'stuff' and then sort much of it out when we arrive?"

Ralph Milton leaped from the mosquito to a poem by Ogden Nash:

"God in his wisdom made the fly,
but then forgot to tell us why."

Isabel Gibson wondered about our rescuer-complex, evidenced in our need to pull weeds: “Just as having someone to blame means that we don't have to look at our own actions and responsibility for our situation, so it also means that we don't have to accept that there are some things that are not ‘fixable’.

“In my view, neither the world nor our own selves are perfect or perfectable. That doesn't mean we should stop trying to make them better -- but it might mean that we should also relax enough to enjoy it (the world and our own selves), as it/we is/are.”

Suzanne Edgar wrote, “I am a gardener, and a progressive theolog! Thank you for several wonderful laughs; very, very funny writing, with a lovely final ironic twist!”

Suzanne added, “I'm using your psalm on Sunday, with credit of course.”

Caroline Davidson also used the psalm paraphrase on Sunday.

Clare Neufeld challenged my biblical accuracy: “What passage says the fruit they ate was an apple?”

In a subsequent letter, Clare conceded that the notion of an apple may be another of those popular misconceptions, like the common insistence that there were THREE wise men...

Clare disputed the argument that “weeds were not mentioned. They are: simply not specifically differentiated from ‘all plant life’.”

A few readers leaped to the defence of the humble dandelion. Jim Henderschedt wrote, “What a delightful piece! But just for the fun of it I am sending a rebuttal in favor of the much aligned dandelion. Your article reminded me of something I read in Robert Fulghum's book ‘All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten’. My Buddhist leanings tempt me to entitle this ‘Compassion for Weeds.’”

Similarly, Steve Roney pointed out the virtues of many so-called weeds: “I'd like to take issue with you on what is and is not a noxious weed. I think this has a deeper point: what it means to say that nature fell with man.”

Steve expounded the benefits of dandelions, plantain, and crabgrass, in some detail. He continued: “So how come these things are considered ‘weeds,’ and worse than useless? Their fault, it appears, is simply that they are too easy to grow. They grow without being cultivated, even in the worst conditions. We do not value what comes too easy. I would venture to suggest that caviar does not taste any better, objectively, than dandelions. We prize it more only because it is more difficult to get. It is perhaps largely in this sense that nature has fallen along with man: it is our perverse attitude towards it. This perverse attitude prevents God from helping us, when his help and bounty is often all around.

“And isn't this perversity, in the end, exactly the same as the original sin of the Garden of Eden itself? We only want what we cannot get.”

Dale Sattizahn wrote, “I loved your analogy and your sarcasm for the human need to find someone to blame. Unfortunately, that is becoming an issue in churches today.

“However, I wanted to share my perspective of weeds. Growing up on a farm in central Pennsylvania, weeds were a challenge. When we defeat the weeds in the field, it is like a general defeating a foe. The weeds are the enemy that must be defeated. When I pull weeds I get the same sense of accomplishment -- the mighty enemy has fallen! To this day I enjoy pulling weeds. I will admit, however, that this is not normal, even among farmers.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

May 20 could be either the 7th Sunday of Easter, or Ascension Sunday – for which the lectionary offers three different psalm choices. I've chosen to go with one of the two suggestions for Ascension Sunday, Psalm 47.

I've based my paraphrase on two images. One is that picture taken by NASA of a blue-green planet, bright against the eternal darkness of space; the other is Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, showing God not so much clothed in light as a creature composed of light itself.

1 The Lord wears light like a royal robe;
it dazzles those who gaze upon the Lord.
The whole world is God's royal throne;
like a sapphire, it shines in the darkness of nothingness.
2 The earth has been God's home from the beginning;
Before time began, God was here.
3 What is as irresistible as a river in flood?
Its banks cannot contain it;
trees and homes are swept along.
Thundering waters dominate the valley.
4 So God dominates this fragile planet.
But God is greater than any flood,
greater than surf that pounds a rocky shore into sand.
5 For God is not capricious, ruling by random whim;
God shapes the future with justice and fairness.
Thus is the whole earth made holy.
Hear, O earth! The Lord, the Lord alone, is God.
Now, and always.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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