

The word christian in paragraph 4 is intentionally lowercase
Ignorance indentured them to the coal bosses.

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“Reptiles and Mammals”

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Can alligators learn? If you questioned this decades ago the answer would be an emphatic, “No.” Reptiles only obey their instincts, genes rule brains. Modern research, however, has begun to suggest tortoises, snakes, and, yes, alligators have a capacity to learn, howsoever limited compared to mammals. After all, we believe groundhogs know when they see their shadows. Can Puxatany snakes? Our Labrador fetched the Frisbee after several throws. She also discovered the mischievous delight in keep-a-way. Our son’s pet box turtle never did get the knack.

Two words describing this difference between reptilian and mammalian brains are “extra-genetic” and “extra-somatic.” Mammals evolved brains that can collect information from sources outside the body and use it beyond their genetic code. Question: Might this imply that when we mammals are cruel it’s because we want to be cruel?

What’s our taxonomy? Domain: Eukarya (cell based). Kingdom: Animals (we move on our own). Phylum: Chordates (we have vertebra). Class: Mammals (furry with milk glands). Order: Primates. Family: Hominids (by mastering walking upright, bipedal, our hands were freed to invent tools). Genus: Homo. Species: Homo Sapiens. Sapiens in Latin means, “wise” (although sometimes you could have fooled me). We have big brains, which explains why human babies are born with such oversized pelvis-painful heads. This also explains why our children’s dependency lasts longer than all animals (sometimes till their thirties). The higher the specie, the longer the dependency.

Many of us, perhaps, are smarter than dolphins. Even the dumbest among us is smarter than a box turtle. Whether or not we use our intelligence is another matter altogether (Q-Anon comes to mind). Supposedly the zenith of evolution, we humans supposedly have the highest ability to gather information, remember it, and apply it, compared to all other creatures. Dolphins may squeak and click but writing is humankind’s supreme technological achievement. Words. Our ability to write and read is the premier example of extra-somatic learning, encouraging our ability to recognize failings and avoid repeating them. This salutes why local newspapers are indispensable. We may dislike what we read. We may disagree with what we read. We are, however, better equipped by what we read. I still chuckle at the new seminarian who leveled charges of heresy against an Old Testament professor for teaching ideas the student didn’t like to hear. Behold the sin of myopic modern christians voting: “Forward to the 1950’s!”

When we read, we raft down the Mississippi alongside a fugitive slave. We name stars we spot at night. We learn they still shine during daylight, but the sun is too bright. We stare beyond our solar system and realize there’s likely hundreds of galaxies in the observable universe for each earthling alive today. When we read, we discover how a young boy in Kabul experiences his world. We enter the life of a mother in South Africa oppressed by apartheid or walk in the sneakers of an adolescent boy who feels like a bullied outcast. We get transported out of our particular culture into the culture of a Mexican pueblo. God help those who think that sliced white bread is the only true type of bread there is.

One vivid morning long ago I stood at the end of my driveway imagining that another young boy far away was looking at his neighborhood and realizing, as did I, how the world was more than his neighborhood. This was my earliest 'aha' revelation. My safe, tidy world crumbled before this earthshaking moment, only to be rebuilt, reborn, launched toward dangerous possibilities far larger and assuredly far more wonderful. This awakening happened again when my pastor (fostering "minds freed from error, spirits freed from baseness") challenged me to imagine how the mythological truths of metaphorical Adam and Eve speak today. My Bible became unshackled, my faith energized.

Extra-genetic and extra-somatic learning is why we expend exacting efforts on educating our young, drawing forth potential, asking questions rather than packaging them like sausages. Teddy Roosevelt pushed to enact Child Labor Laws because children forced by poverty to work in the mines missed out on going to school. This sinister, uncivil, denial of a chance for education trapped them into their misery. Ignorance indentured them to cold coal bosses. There's a special circle in millstone hell for sanctimonious authoritarians who limit, stifle, regulate, and control people's liberty to learn, dictating what children cannot read. Reptilian brutes stomping on dreams. Their hell threatens the rest of us with, as poet John Milton hauntingly described, a "dungeon of myself."