

Children of God

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince - and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment.

So avers the argenteous prose and leaden promise of the eighteenth-century American revivalist Jonathan Edwards¹.

Here in Britain we have a tiny but very venomous creature called the money spider^a, whom old superstition calls the harbinger of wealth. With unfathomable wisdom he parachutes in on a strand of gossamer to build his hammocks on my lawn where only the dew of a summer's morn will betray his handiwork. Christ tells us that fowls do not gather into barns^b neither lilies spin^c but the money spider is a master fabricant though arachnologists must reach for their microscopes to examine his brain.

On the sunlit lawns of my Sussex kindergarten flirtatious little girls exclaimed "Jimmy, Jimmy, you've got a money spider" as they retrieved the barely visible black globule of life from my hair, whilst he shinned up his phantom rope to nestle on their flesh. Though eminently capable he did not bite. What Guardian assured him that he was arrested by the sportive hands of infants, and should presently be delivered? Did hot little hands burn him like fire yet remain unprovoked?

Some years ago I read of laborers digging the sludge from a settling pond in a Midland sewage farm on a sultry Mercian day much like this. Suddenly an entire airborne division of these tiny spiders landed on their naked backs and bit so voraciously that those hardy men ceased work immediately and sought medical assistance. No lasting damage was done (at least to humans!) but what prompted these little voyagers to deploy their only weapon in circumstances with so little promise of profit? Money spiders have done nothing to defray my debt but I owe them something.

My Korean wife considers England a demiparadise and told her relatives that "even the animals are gentle", but three of our species have known lethality. Two or three summers ago Jana and I walked down an overgrown path on Cannock Chase when I froze as I heard a disembodied hiss. I looked down to see a stout old viper^d coiled beside my left shin. Jana wisely ran down the brae but I was too close to risk a sudden movement. The venomous serpent reared to strike and the gaunt black barb of his head looked hard and satanic as he abhorred the loathsome surprise above him. Then I said defensively "Hello, snake, don't you hiss at *me*" whereupon he hastened across my path and disappeared into the bracken. After my brief St Patrick act I wondered whether the snake could not bear to have me in his hearing or whether he was truly reassured. By me? No? Then by whom?

The second killer is very different. As an undergraduate I undertook geological mapping alone amongst the rocky splendor of the Atholl Highlands. Sometimes I would look up from my outcrops to watch the stately herds of red deer^e process in silence behind magnificently-

antlered stags as, ignoring me, they patrolled the windswept fastnesses of their range. Wealthy "sportsmen" dreadfully provoke these princes and sometimes themselves quit the hill aback a garron.

A few days ago my Father and I drove to Invermark for a walk up the glen beside Loch Lee. We admired the superb fibrous iron fenestration of the ruined castle at the wayside but were less impressed by the extempore gunloops driven through the walls by the Home Guard. Some loops commanded the eastern valley approach from Strathmore and the sea but others pointed westward into the mountains. I said to my Father "surely they could not have expected the Nazis to come from *there*?" and he speculated that they might have had paratroops in mind. I said "would *you* drop men into that rock-strewn hell up there?"

The future is fantasy. When we prepare our defense it is in anticipation of evil which may not merely fail to ensue, but may even be impossible. Perhaps we share Jonathan's preoccupation with conscience at the expense of paying consciousness due regard. For our apprehension of danger is conditioned by the level of our understanding as well as our faulty expectation of our enemy. Perhaps this is what Satan learned when after the Forty Days he abandoned Christ to the wilderness[†]. We cannot despise the spider for mistaking his predicament or the snake for his change of tactics when we ourselves spend centuries against legions who never march.

Further up the glen my Father and I found a tiny graveyard above the placid hill-girt lake. The high dry-stane walls shelter a roofless kirk and the sleeping generations from the roaring Highland winds remitted that day. Saplings had been planted to replace the great trees that the elders of the parish had nurtured in the days when meager harvests supported a peasantry. Beyond, the peaty waters of the loch riffled in the breeze with the unctuous gleam that a diffused sun confers upon standing water in these oblique latitudes. On the ancient tombstones within were graven the skulls and scapulae with which ancient Scottish custom betokened death. The small plain sandstone tablets of feudal times were rudely carved with what earnest "Irish" tribesmen fancied to be English orthography whilst their skulls were cartoon faces and their bones like steerage oars. Father thought they were carved by kin of the deceased. In vital contrast the local dominie, buried a mere thirty years later, had a refined slab of freestone whose precise North British Letters were framed with *momenti mori* of grim Hunterian realism. The iron gates were open and a ewe and lamb grazed the lush lawns of the graveyard. As we entered the ewe left and the lamb became agitated upon loosing sight of her. Father tried to maneuver him toward the gate but, because I was near the gate, the lamb panicked and ran to the other side of the enclosure where he and his mother disconsolately exchanged bleats through the wall. He was unable to perceive the exit to reunion even when I left the vicinity. It was as if, knowing what he wanted and being in full communion with it, his fear and forgetfulness had robbed him of the means.

As we left the churchyard to walk beside the lake we saw distantly ahead on the track a group of brightly-anoraked people milling about shouting and throwing stones in the water. They did not seem of childish stature and I contemplated with trepidation our passage through such a pack of yobs. As Father and I drew into the midst of these people their disengaged manners and mongoloid faces clarified that they were idiots, and far from being yobs those capable gave us kindly smiles and civil greetings. I call them "idiots" because to be an idiot is wholly honorable and a condition to be respected. It may be true that their facility at (say) inferential statistics is not as developed as mine but are you going to sneer at me because I never mastered the art of the Laplace transform? Am I accordingly "a person with learning difficulties" or perhaps a "mentally-challenged person"? You did not measure the cognition of the money spider or the lamb by your own standards though you may feel justified in classifying me as a "less ontologically able person" or

even a "failed academic". Such circumlocutions are valid enough but you would question the value and relevancy of such apophatic descriptions and as God holds the both of us over the pit of hell will he measure us by our own yardsticks, or by His Perfect Measure, or judge us as what we truly are?

After sharing lunch near the bridge at the head of Loch Lee, my Father and I briskly returned to the car park at Invermark. The council had planted a young rowan^e on a grass verge and a very obese cock chaffinch bobbed beneath, like a little ball of mauve-pink knitting wool. As we neared the car large flocks of pastel cocks settled in expectant silence and bobbed around us with the odd dun hen. Towards the rear of one flight a single chaffinch thought I may have overlooked their presence and uttered a brief squeak. I said "What do you mean?:- squeak" as I broke some water biscuits and scattered the voracious crumbs. It seemed to me that parents were taking a well-earned refreshment between frantic bouts of feeding insectivorous children and I prayed for their safety and their success. Father told me to marshall the birds aside whilst he reversed the car over the crumbs but the flock disappeared aloft at the first movement, doubtless to re-align on our departure.

Edwards asks us to see ourselves as our own worst fears: The insidious, venomous, easily-overlooked enemy against which an ape has no defense, for his defense is predicated upon the visible, the physical and the predictable. The Darwinian and similar mechanistic paradigms of creation tend to "explain" the nature and origin of creatures in terms of adaptive selection. Like all models of reality this is fine as long as it is not extrapolated beyond the reaches of tenability. But it seems to me that such models falter when one considers the operations of *compensation* and of *choice*. The money spider shares a strange condition with the notorious Black Widowⁱ; the European Viper; and with Man himself:- He is naked. Whereas most spiders and many other animals are protected by a rich pile of urticaceous hairs or long sharp teeth these vulnerable creatures need possess and deploy venomous wrath. Contrast the glabrous spiders with a potent but dozy creature like the Mexican Red-Kneed Tarantula who is as hispid as a hedgehog^j and just as complacent. Boys attempt to keep both species as pets and can do so safely. For sure, you can explain alternative defensive adaptations mechanistically if you are prepared to defy Occam^k and draw a very long bow. But I think that choice remains a problem for mechanistic schemes. Why does an animal whose neurological capacity for dexterity or decision seems so inadequate build a hammock on grass but not brick, or bite a workman but spare a child?

Isaiah promised us that one day beyond time the suckling infant would play by the hole of the asp and the weaned child place his hand on the cockatrice' den with impunity^l. Perhaps he foresaw a sentient state in which the mundane imperatives to feed or become food would be redundant.

Maybe God needs no fires because His pure eyes discern the Essence in Ways to which partial eyes, whether two or eight, are blind. *We* need fires to refine our ideas for we know that in the base regulus of thought there is often a refulgent silver bead that will trickle to the cupel as the dross and litharge blows from our cupola's hearth.

Notes

- a A black glabrous arachnid of the Linyphia family.
Leg spread varies from about one to two millimeters.
- b Matthew 6:26
- c Matthew 6:28
- d Vipera Berus: A viviparous basking snake up to 65 cms

long having dark zigzag markings along its back.

Known in Britain as the "adder" it has there occasioned six human fatalities since 1900.

There are no Irish snakes: According to legend St Patrick expelled them.

- e Cervus Elaphus: A horse-sized tawny ungulate common on uncultivated uplands that have occasional tree cover.
- f Matthew 4:1,11
- g Sorbus Aucuparia: A silver-barked deciduous tree of acid upland soils which grows up to five meters tall
- h Fringilla Coelebs: A gregarious, usually silent European passerine. Cock has distinctive mauve-pink breast feathers.
- i Latrodéctus Máctans: A glabrous American arachnid. The larger and more venomous female has occasioned eighty-eight human fatalities since 1620.
- j Erinaceous Europaeus: A spiny insectivore mammal of European undergrowth. Adult length twenty to thirty centimeters.
- k William of Occam or Ockham (c1290-1349) English Franciscan nominalist who introduced The Rule of Parsimony, or as he put it "accidentals should not be multiplied beyond necessity".
- l Isaiah 11:8

Reference

- 1 "The Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought"
Tony Lane 1996
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