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CONFIDENCE AND THE GREAT LEAP IN HUMAN EVOLUTION

Somewhere within the last 120,000 thousand years, our ancestors began migrations quite different than any that appear in the archeological record preceding that time and somewhere between forty and fifty thousand years ago those migrations accelerated to the point that Cro Magnon hominids, (Homo sapiens) our forebears, settled every nook and cranny on the planet, as we do today. The last major migration occurred when the land bridge opened up in Siberia, as the glacier receded ten thousand years ago, and Homo Sapiens, who our specie had become by then, trudged all the way to Tierra del Fuego within a thousand years or so.

Jared Diamond (“The Third Chimpanzee” & “Guns, Germs, and Steel”) makes a case for some biological change, probably related to speech, as the variable making such migrations possible. He also makes the observation that these human migrations were coincident with the extinction of large mammals. The archeological evidence seems to bear this out. All over the planet there is fossil evidence of the extinction of one large mammal after another at approximately the same time the human migrations happened in that part of the world. Some scientists speculate that the cause of these extinctions is more complicated than the fact that they are coincident with the expansion of humans and they are probably right but something, of major proportions in the evolution of our specie, definitely changed to allow humans to sweep across all but the most uninhabitable places on earth in a relatively short period of time.

Dr. Diamond is careful to temper his speculation with the caution that all the facts are not yet in, and probably never will be, I might add. As a biology oriented scientist he continues to look to some physical/anatomical change to account for the advances made by humans resulting in our capacity to take on the unknown dangers lying beyond the next range of mountains or across the next river.

For a couple of million years humans had evolved fairly slowly toward that point when a “great leap” occurred in the pace of our development. Anatomically we are about the same now as we have been for the last 125,000 years so the guess is that some language advancement made the difference. Linguists have traced the capacity to speak back through a few proto languages to a point where the development of the ability to speak gets lost in the jumble of many historical events. Several thousand years exist between the point to which linguists can trace back the complexity of human language and the point at which the migrations are known to have occurred. The anatomical evidence emerging from the archeological record regarding the capacity to speak seems to have to do with the hyoid bone which anchors the muscles of the tongue and other parts of the voice box apparatus. This bone in early humans is nothing like similar bones in apes and it suggests these people at least had the ability for fairly sophisticated communication for hundreds of thousands of years. It also appears that Neanderthals, having a similar bone in their necks, had the physical capacity for complex speech going back many hundreds of

thousands of years. One of the issues being debated by experts of this era of hominid development is whether Neanderthals had the cognitive ability to reduce the world around them to symbols expressed in words and art, which underlies the capacity for articulate speech. Those who see the Neanderthals as an essentially symbol free culture come to that conclusion based on the dazzling art on the walls of certain caves inhabited by Cro Magnons at that time. Since the Neanderthals had not left such evidence of artistic ability they are assumed to have been inferior in intellect to their contemporaries, the Cro Magnon. An easy conclusion to reach by those who are the descendants of the Cro Magnon rather than the Neanderthals. Another way of looking at it might be that both the Cro Magnon and the Neanderthals had comparable intellectual capacity and were in a parallel evolutionary process when the Cro Magnon took the “great leap” forward and the Neanderthals did not. I’d like to suggest that leap forward had to do with a sense of **confidence** gained through being able to kill other mammals which, there to fore, were so fearful that venturing beyond the boundaries of a fairly prescribed territory was unheard of. Such a fear gripped me one day, when walking by the tiger cages at a zoo, I looked back and saw my youngest son walking behind his mom and his brother being stalked by a caged tiger. The tiger paid no attention to the rest of the family but had singled out the youngest, most vulnerable. If the tiger were not caged I am confident he would have torn my son to pieces before our very eyes. To be sure both Cro Magnon and Neanderthals experienced such encounters and such loss. Neanderthals, being the stronger of the two, may well have been the first to successfully confront such a threat but it was not until such threats could be confidently and consistently confronted that humans were free to move beyond the boundaries of “safe zones”. The very art that paleoanthropologists use as evidence of the superior intellect of the Cro Magnon may be the clue to why they took the great leap and Neanderthals did not.

Try to imagine, as a male, teaching your son to go out and kill a cave lion before humans became the dominant specie. Unless your son had actually been there when you and your brothers and cousins had figured out how to do it, it would be a challenge to get him to go into the cave, with his brothers and cousins, without fear overwhelming and incapacitating him. Enter the cave art of the Iberian Peninsula and Southern Europe. For a generation or two some special mechanism was needed to prepare a boy to believe he could actually kill some thing as fearsome as an enraged rhinoceros. Being led to the bowels of a cave and suddenly exposed to the animals all around you as part of a “calming” ritual may have been that mechanism. After a while it would no longer be necessary to maintain such a powerful rite of passage since the killing, even to the point of extinction, would become common place. And the most spectacular, most dazzling cave art would no longer be necessary or worth investing in. Cave art of that magnitude would come to an end which, in fact, it did. Fear of the power of nature would remain to continue some degree of respect in humans for our environment but the fear of being torn to pieces by some other predator, as your family watched helplessly (not to say this would never happen again) would no longer be one of the major constrainters of human behaviors. A door is opened through which humans pass with no appreciation of the unintended consequences of these new skills.

As they/we reached the tip of South America leaving a wake of extinction/conquest in our path, we must have looked out at the oceans feeling fairly confident and invincible. Sort of like the Patriots marching down the field to win in the last sixty seconds with Tom Brady completing those impossible passes. The Americas settled into a more bucolic state until just a few hundred years ago when the peoples of these great continents were themselves brought to their knees by conquerors from the very same territory they/we marched away from ten thousand years before. A fascinating perspective of human history which sets the stage for the history I was taught in school, one war after another in what appeared to be a search for a peaceful spot to birth and nurture our children.

As I now look at history with the longer perspective of fifty thousand years or so, the role of the male as that of protector through killing is clear. A function we have very effectively been bred into although there have been periods when matriarchy prevailed and the wisdom acquired by observing the environment rather than confronting and conquering it, was the vehicle through which danger was mitigated. I suspect we males have always been a bit uncomfortable with this power we acquired rather abruptly through cultural revolution, hard to appreciate the significance of, as we look back from our current vantage point. This uneasiness with killing may even have its roots in a sense of shame we carry from those earliest days of our new found powers when we faced our ancestral cousins, the Neandertals, who became extinct about the same time the Cro Magnons lost our virginity through beginning the march of domination. In a cruel twist of fate it may even have been the Neandertals who first realized they could feel safer and thereby more confident by killing/subduing the wild things around them. Just as Atahullpa misjudged the intentions of Pizarro in 1532 bringing the whole Inca nation to its knees, the Neandertals may have misjudged the intentions of their neighbors in using the power of domination as a prelude to their own extinction. We will never know for sure whether the Neandertals were the brothers symbolized in the death of Abel but the timing seems to fit with the expulsion from or rejection of the Garden of Eden.

The fact we males don't really feel all that comfortable with the residual of our role as killers seems evident all around me. I hated that fight in the first grade when I was introduced to the bully from the other end of the neighborhood who somehow challenged my very essence by offering to fight me. Truman said no to McArthur, the people said no to Vietnam, millions cringe at the site of babies dying for lack of adequate medical care in Basra. Indeed a powerful movement professes to believe each sperm and egg has a right to life and any killing is a sacrilege. The profession of social work, a democratic form of government and Christianity, all of which I subscribe to, take the position that each individual is sacred. I suspect very few people get up in the morning making the observation that this would be a fine day for killing. Yet, we continue to indoctrinate and train each male in the art of killing. Asked individually nearly all would attest to be opposed to war yet it is the conflict resolution mechanism we have reverted to over and over again through out recorded history. Can we do otherwise?

Fathers are much more involved in raising up the children than in any previous period. Watching them changing diapers in the park or pushing strollers looking a little

bewildered but thoroughly delighted makes me feel we can do otherwise. Playing ring around the rosy with three year olds and delighting in it except for the all fall down part makes me feel we can do otherwise. Nurture is the antonym of killing and millions of fathers around the world have taken on the role of nurturer as mothers take on the role of breadwinner or share that function.

How do we get males from being the pre-eminent killers we have so consciously become is a challenge. How does George W. Bush say he would like a little more tenderness in his relationships without looking like or feeling like a fool? How do good, hard working people like Dick Cheney let go of the fear that his child or his country will be torn to pieces unless we dominate the rest of the world?

Males in Ireland bring males of the specie to a crossroads. They seem to be saying they want to find an alternative to killing each other. An improved economy and a culture compassionate at heart makes opposition to killing somewhat more possible but they continue to struggle. The tendency to fall back on killing when there appears to be a threat is so natural that males hardly blink at the prospect of going to war or killing the perp who sexually molested the child in the next community. Males in Israel and Palestine continue to behave as if some sense of safety is achievable through killing.

The consequences of killing as a way to secure a safe place to birth and nurture children are becoming more apparent as we become a global community and acknowledge that, in spite of all our cultural differences, we are a single specie. Exterminating the enemy is no longer a possibility.

In a global community societal resources will have to be divided up differently than they have been in the past. What is the role that males will play in this? In the last ten thousand years or so we males have given over our role of killing in the service of establishing a “safe” place to raise up children to killing in the service of protecting stores of wealth with both goals so enmeshed as to be somewhat indistinguishable. Unfortunately humankind is racing toward greater centralization of wealth rather than less. The good news is that this race toward owning all the marbles is more obvious now than in the past. The other good news is that most of us either don’t want or feel any need for more than a modest share of the marbles. Greed is the most irrational of all motivators. Those that feel a need to attain more wealth no matter how much they have are truly the unfortunate ones. They never feel fulfilled. Unfortunately, many of those who are destined to always feel unfulfilled are “powerful” since, so far, power has been defined in relation to the material resources one commands. The majority of us have other more fun things to do than acquire stuff that necessitates our tending to and protecting. The additional good news is that the rest of us actually hold the power since we are the many and they are the few and in a world where communication is more universally available, the madness of acquisition beyond need is hard to conceal. It seems to me that the role of males, moving forward in the evolution of our specie, is to wonder together more openly about where the specie is headed and what kind of things and actions are most likely to enhance a sense of well being for an increasing proportion of our increasing numbers.

This may not be that difficult to do in a global community when it has been impossible to do in a world of competing communities where it was difficult to sort through where the threats were actually coming from. Harry Belafonte recently observed that Colin Powell and Condoleeza Rice might be seen similarly to the slaves who were moved into the manor house in order to serve the master and thereby came to see him as an OK kind of guy, which, in most cases, he probably was. Interestingly Ms Rice responded by saying she did not need Harry Belafonte to tell her what it is like to be black. General Powell responded by saying he wished Harry hadn't invoked the slave card since it is from another era and not relevant and besides he is "serving his president, our president". An interesting distinction in that males have been bred to indeed serve the leader no matter what. I think we males have now evolved into a position where we must wonder more openly about what our leaders are doing and whether that serves the purposes of the many or the few. In fact this has been happening for quite some time with many brave males making that final sacrifice by asking the wrong question a little too loudly. Now, however, motivations are far more transparent than they have been. It is astonishing that the people of a country like Iraq did not wonder more openly about the motives of their leader. In fact, it seems like the only rationale to support Saddam's behavior is the threat that others appeared to be to them. A fascinating conundrum.

The tens of thousands of years of history that human males carry into the future places us at a point in time when we must either proceed as before with killing as the mechanism through which we strive to achieve a sense of safety or openly acknowledge that a sense of safety is not achievable through killing. So, what do we do with the predators?, my friends ask me. There is some portion of the human population who are mentally ill to the point of obsessively or erratically killing. These folks can probably not be helped given our current understanding of mental illness so they must be kept in cages. The remainder of the killing is driven by fear. Fear that some threat will preclude a place to safely birth and nurture our children or fear that ones accumulated wealth is vulnerable. In regard to the former it seems increasingly clear that it is our tendency to kill that puts a safe place to raise children in jeopardy. In regard to the latter, it simply makes no sense for the many to risk our lives and the lives of our children in order to perpetuate the illusion that the few will feel fulfilled if only they were to acquire one more BMW.

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