

*"Men are so quick to blame the Gods: they say the Gods devise their misery. But they themselves, in their depravity, design grief greater than the griefs that fate assigns."*

- Homer

*"The mind is it's own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."*

- John Milton

*"We are our own devils; we drive ourselves out of our Edens."*

- Johann Wolfgang Goethe

## Sermon: Listen

Some years ago I went on a rafting and kayaking trip on the Chatooga and Nantahala Rivers in North Carolina and Georgia. We rafted down the same river that the movie Deliverance was filmed on. It turned out that it was just as dangerous as the movie made it seem. Water levels were high and we overturned in a massive rapid. I got stuck under the raft going downstream over rock falls. I set a personal pulse record by the time I got out from under that raft. Later that day I asked the guide what the locals thought of Deliverance. He gave me a sideways look that seemed to suggest he didn't think I was too bright. He asked me in return what I would think about people who portrayed me as an inbred, murderous sodomite. I guessed that the locals weren't that crazy about the movie. The guide confirmed my hunch.

The people on the trip decided the next day to go to a lake nearby and practice kayaking, a sport I had never experienced. I soon found myself upside down in the water, stuck in the kayak, trying to remember the directions for getting out of the cockpit. I had a doctor tell me once that I had the least flexible hamstrings he had ever seen on someone not settling into rigor mortis. As I tried to extract myself from the kayak by somersaulting forward out of the cockpit as per the directions, my inflexible hamstrings caused my foot to get stuck under the seat. I could twist my body enough to get my hands out of water, but not my head. It looked like it was going to end badly and my kayak novice peers were going to get to see if my hamstrings actually were tighter after rigor mortis set in. At the last moment I broke free, clawed to the surface, took the most welcome gasp of breath I'd ever experienced, and spontaneously thanked the Abrahamic God I long since stopped

believing in for allowing me to live. As I held on to the overturned kayak with a death grip, gasping for life saving breath, thanking the God that I would have mocked as a fantasy moments earlier, a giant snake slithered past me in the water, 6 inches from my nose.

This friends, is what we call irony.

I decided I needed a break from paddle sports. As it happened, nearby there was a spur of the famous Appalachian trail. I decided a short walk on terra firma was just the tonic I needed to calm my jittery nerves. I had always dreamed of hiking the Appalachian trail and here was an opportunity for a short day hike - I could have the glory without the commitment. The trail crossed what I believe was the Nantahala river which exited the lake I had so recently communed with a snake on. There was a walking bridge across the river, a narrow span that swayed ever so slightly as you walked across. I walked to the middle of the bridge and stopped to look upstream at the rapids coming down the river. It was a sublime and beautiful view. I considered myself blessed to see such a sight.

I started to walk to the opposite side of the bridge and continue my short journey on the Appalachian trail. After two brief steps I heard a buzzing sound. There in front of me, at eye level, was the biggest, scariest hornet I've ever seen. It was furry. It's stinger was visible. I stopped in my tracks. I wanted nothing to do with this gigantic stinging monster. I squatted to duck under it. It lowered it's flight, staying at eye level. I stood back up and it raised with me, staying right at eye level. I tried again, it lowered again, I stood up, it stayed at eye level the entire time. It was as if it had a conscious understanding that, by staying at eye level, it would utterly discombobulate me.

I decided I would concede defeat and retreat back to the river bank, back to where I had started. I turned around. I noticed the buzzing was in stereo. I now had another hornet on the other side of me, just like it's companion, at eye level. I tried to squat under it, it lowed to eye level. I stood up, it rose to remain at eye level. I was trapped between two hornets, preventing me from going either direction. I couldn't go

forward or backward, as it would risk being stung. I couldn't go to either side, as I would fall a great distance into the river.

It was 90 degrees out with high humidity. It was mid day in the sun. I was incredulous at what was happening. I was trapped on a rickety, swaying bridge, high above river rapids, hornets trapping me in place.

There was nothing to do. I tried every so often to go one direction or the other, squatting to squeeze under them, each time they stayed at eye level. It was as if they were consciously toying with me.

I baked in the sun, pondering the odds of living if I jumped into the river. I am not a good swimmer. I prayed once again to the God I was dismissive of when things were going well. The irony meter was creaking from the stress.

The raft adventure had been scary but understandable. The water was high and we turned over in a rapids. The kayak adventure had been understandable. I turned over and didn't have the experience and skill to safely exit the kayak. Even the snake was understandable. Water snakes inhabit lakes.

But the hornet thing was inexplicable. Why would they seek me out over a river on a bridge, hover on either side of me, and adjust the height of their flight every time I tried to lower myself to get past them? It was as if they knew my fear and were exploiting it. It was as if they had agreed to torture me. I was anxious, afraid, and wondering what forces were at work. But most jarring was a realization. Something dangerous and unsettling was happening and I had absolutely no solution to the problem. I had a fearful, impossible situation on my hands.

What, I asked, is the cosmos telling me?

Recently I was on a walk with a friend. It had just rained and the air was fresh and cool and beautiful, towering clouds above were framed by open blue skies. Suddenly, right in our field of vision, the most perfectly formed rainbow I'd ever seen appeared

with a remarkable suddenness, and immediately revealing itself as a double rainbow that stretched all the way to the ground on both of its legs. I had never seen a perfectly formed, complete double rainbow in my life, nor had my friend. We laughed and marveled at the beautiful sight. We walked for probably 15 minutes, taking in the remarkably lovely and majestic sight. It seemed like an omen, a sign from the cosmos.

What, I wondered, was the cosmos telling us?

The human brain is designed to try to make sense of things. We know that the brain's user interface, consciousness, actively constructs reality, and usually constructs a reality based on our preconceived notions. When we ponder what the cosmos is telling us regarding things like bees trapping us on a bridge, or double rainbows appearing out of nowhere, we are inclined to find an explanation rooted in our preconceived notions.

I read not long that scientists are recording sounds that come from stars, gathering data for research purposes. We are recording the sounds of the stars, the objects that ancient Egyptians thought were representations of god. They are listening to the cosmos.

I wondered - what are the sounds of the cosmos telling us?

We can listen but do we hear anything other than the reflection of our preconceived notions?

There is a well known phenomena called confirmation bias. When we hear information, whether from a conversation, or a radio or tv show, or elsewhere, before the information is completely shared, our biases and experiences shape our perception of it. Sometime a few moments into a discussion, our take on the discussion is hardened because of what is already floating around in our head.

So the trick then is to create internal biases that embrace positive, life affirming qualities. We need to rig our biases to ensure we engage the world in a way that is empathetic, a way that helps us to be our better, rather than lesser selves.

Here is the design of the universe: Everything in the universe comes from the big bang. We are made out of stars. Proteins from that big bang have coalesced to create metabolic life from the matter of stars. That life has adapted and evolved to favor life with consciousness, and further favors creatures with empathy, as well as adaptive behavior that favors success in reproducing. Because of the nature of our central nervous system, the universe allows life forms to view the universe and draw conclusions. The conclusions are based on our preconceived notions, notions that we create. We are creators. The design of the universe allows us to make our perception and attitudes regarding life whatever we want them to be. We can choose to view our experiences as negative or as positive. It is up to us. We can choose to be in heaven, or we can choose to be in hell.

It is worth considering that such a structure can allow the individual to be delusional. But there is a built in fail safe mechanism. Ethics and morality are adaptive behaviors that improve chances for replication. Thus it is to our advantage to be honest when forming the world we live in. Being honest with ourselves makes us more likely to succeed as replicators.

Choose a beautiful world, a world of empathy, a world of love and companionship. It is really up to you.

The hornets eventually tired of me and moved on, before I turned them into evidence of a dangerous and indifferent world. I turned them into a story today to provide people with a smile. The snake ignored me. I chose to apply a funny lesson of irony to it. The double rainbow I assigned as evidence that the cosmos is beautiful, and that the cosmos approved of my companion and me.

I could have made each into a lesson regarding a sinister world, a world of indifference, a world of danger. It would be a common approach people take. The

buddha taught that suffering is an inescapable part of life. But he teaches that how we react to suffering is where the magic of life occurs. Our reaction to life's travails determines the nature of our journey in life. Listen to life. And make it a beautiful journey that always acknowledges your blessings. You get to choose. A hornet or a rainbow.