

January 2009: Meditations on the New Year (or, Lessons from Nature)

Although the concept of the new year—indeed, the calendar itself—is very much a human construct, there’s something about opening a crisp new calendar to January that never fails to stir me with a primal sense of renewal and hope. And right now, that’s something we all need more than ever.

The uncertainty caused by the roller coaster of global finances in the past year has caused people everywhere to grasp for signs of hope and optimism. I’ve noticed this professionally, of course, but also, interestingly, in the tenor of the wildlife stories and videos family and friends have e-mailed to me lately. Clearly there’s a socio-cultural need for these stories right now. For most of us, unless we’re Grizzly Adams, wild animals live alongside us in that parallel universe called Nature. To witness a wild animal’s ability to beat the odds—to seemingly overturn the “tooth and claw” law of Nature—perhaps makes us feel like we too can evade the predators and disasters within our own lives and somehow come out on top.

A few months ago, for example, my sister-in-law shared a You Tube video shot during a safari in South Africa’s Kruger National Park in which a baby water buffalo is marked as prey by a pride of five or six young lions. Two of the lions chase the calf from the herd into a nearby river, and they all pounce on it. The calf itself is no longer visible beneath the cluster of lions in the water. As if that weren’t bad enough, suddenly the water stirs and a crocodile tries to pull the calf away from the lions. The lions struggle to retain their prey, the poor calf being literally stretched between crocodile and lion jaws. The lions prevail and crouch around the body—at a safe distance now from the water—to begin their feast. But then, the herd of water buffalo comes streaming back with vengeance in their determined gallop. The head buffalo chases away the lions one by one, hooking some of them with its horns. And as the lions thin out, a miracle occurs: the buffalo calf rises to its feet and runs off with the herd, apparently unharmed.

There are many obvious analogies one could make here, to mob justice, the survival of innocence against all odds, the power of community... It’s truly a jungle out there for more than those water buffalos.

In another inspiring video I watched recently on You Tube, several people in a rubber boat watch a gentoo penguin. Every few seconds the penguin pops out of the water like a little black torpedo. Cool. But...it’s surrounded by a pod of killer whales. The killer whales are clearly circling the penguin, though it can’t be more than a bite-sized snack for one of them. The killer whales toy with it, chasing it around and around. They’re so close to and so much bigger than the bird that its demise is just a matter of which whale decides to take the first bite. The animals move nearer; at one point a guy leans over the boat’s side while a whale passes beneath it, and the people in the boat shout in surprise. Then the camera jumps, more shouts, and there’s the penguin standing on the front of the boat, looking like that was its intended destination all along. The whale nearest the boat sticks his head out of the water, seems to snort in disgust, and swims away with the rest of the pod. One of the last shots is of the penguin still in the boat, sitting on a

woman's knee. The message we can take away is clear: never give up hope. But don't expect someone to come bail you out—you've got to make it to the life raft on your own.

The most moving story I've received by email recently was about a humpback whale found near the Farallon Islands off California that was so entangled in fishing lines it could barely keep itself afloat. A group of divers went in and successfully cut the whale free with curved knives. Apparently, when the whale was freed, it swam around in "joyous circles," then nudged each diver as if to thank him or her. According to the story, the diver who cut free the whale's mouth said that the whale watched him the whole time and that his life will never be the same.

This was sent to me soon after I had received some sad news, so that may have prompted all the tears. But in truth, it was very comforting to read a story with such a happy ending, that spoke of the value of community support, helping one's neighbor, righting a wrong, and simple gratitude. It's no wonder these things are making the Internet rounds—this is exactly what we want to hear right now. What intrigues me is the fact that they are "nature stories," stories about animals with obvious lessons for humans, in the manner of Aesop's fables. Have these become the morality tales of our time, passed around via e-mail rather than told to the child on one's knee by the campfire?

The beginning of the new year brings the inauguration of a new president later this month—and no matter what your politics, the historic election of Barack Obama will usher in a new era, a fresh start. But we can't just expect that exterior change to make things "all better." The Chinese Year of the Ox begins on January 26 (in Vietnam, Year of the Water Buffalo), and we're all going to need the stubbornness, patience, and hard work of the ox or buffalo to keep from sinking into despair before this recession is over. So one of my New Year's resolutions will be to remember these stories—and others that will undoubtedly be passed around—and remain hopeful. If a water buffalo calf can survive being attacked by lions and a crocodile thanks to the help of its herd, we can "think local" and help each other get through this economic crisis—and be a stronger community for it.