

In their book entitled, “Why God Won’t Go Away,” authors Andrew Newburg and Eugene D’Aquili assess the brain and its activity when God is experienced.

Naturally, in such a book they examine each part of the brain and the function of each part. They look at the development of the brain and compare the human brain to the brains of animals and even to the nervous systems of worms.

We are told that the goal of every living brain, no matter what its level of sophistication, from the nerve cells that govern the behavior of insects to the intricate complexity of the human brain, is to enhance the organism’s chances of survival. The process which guides the rudimentary nervous system of a flat worm to avoid potential danger is the same process which guides an Einstein.

The difference between the human brain and the nervous system of a worm is a matter of complexity. Complexity separates the worm from the toad, the toad from the chimp, the chimp from Shakespeare.

Again, the goal of the brain is to enhance the organism’s chances of survival. Because of the complexity of the HUMAN brain, we have the capacity to anticipate good and bad situations, imagine potential outcomes to those situations, and make plans for the best results. We can store food, plant crops, dig wells. We can band together in tribes, develop communication, share resources, and plan to defend ourselves. We can look ahead and anticipate threats to our chance for survival.

And that is one crucial difference between the human brain and the brain of an animal. An animal cannot think in the abstract. The antelope, for example, cannot anticipate in the abstract the presence of a threatening cheetah. The antelope must have EVIDENCE of a threat. If a grazing antelope is startled by a rustling in the brush, it must see or smell the threat before its brain kicks in with the rush of adrenalin and the increased heart rate, and says, “Run!”

The human mind, on the other hand, is able to do what the animal brain cannot: think of danger in the abstract, even when no threat is at hand. Imagine the prehistoric hunter making his way home through unfamiliar woods. His mind wanders as he travels, and he is only absently aware of the noises of the forest.

But when a twig snaps in the brush, his mind is instantly, involuntarily focused, “What might it mean? What might that snap of a twig mean to my survival?” He doesn’t have to see the leopard to imagine the potential danger of a leopard lurking in the forest. He can think in the abstract of the possibility of danger.

With the snap of a twig the computational task is staggering. The brain is like a computer. In an instant, all the brain’s memory files are consulted, all irrelevant data ignored, and the best hunch made: a leopard – even though it could have been a deer. The hunter’s ability to think in the abstract might save his life. The brain enhances his chances of survival.

We all know firsthand our capacity to project ahead the possibility of danger. We may not have an occasion to walk through the jungle, but we know the value of recognizing a potentially dangerous situation and projecting ahead the possibilities of a threat.

A student can calculate instantly the consequences of a low test score.

A salesperson can project ahead instantly the negative consequences of a dissatisfied customer.

A politician – with antennae extended – recognizes instantly a dangerous question from the crowd which can threaten his or her political life.

A preacher can calculate instantly the consequences of an unpopular stance.

The computational task is staggering. In an instant we can project ahead to dangerous possibilities – sometimes just “borrowing trouble” and sometimes actually enhancing our chances for survival. We are hardwired that way. That is to say, we are wired to perceive a threatening situation; we are wired to fear. Fear can be a good thing. Fear can keep us alive.

Throughout the Bible we read about fear. From “Fear not, Abraham; I am your shield” in Genesis to “Fear not; I am with you,” in Isaiah to “Do not fear those who kill the body” in the synoptic gospels to the familiar passage from First John, “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear,” God calls us beyond survival, beyond self-preservation, to love. Not at all suggesting that fear of wild animals is a bad thing, we are called beyond our hardwired capacity to survive in order to love.

Today in the life of the Church we commemorate someone who encountered wild animals, not in a jungle, but in a Roman arena. Vibia Perpetua was a young widow and the mother of an infant. According to our trusted publication, “Holy Women, Holy Men,” Perpetua and her companions were catechumens preparing for baptism.

Early in the third century, the Emperor decreed that all persons should sacrifice to the divinity of the emperor. As Christians, confessing faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ, there was no way Perpetua and her companions could comply. So, they were arrested and held in prison in miserable conditions. At the public hearing, her aging father begged her to save her own life by making her allegiance to the emperor, but she declared, “I am a Christian.”

To quote “Holy Women, Holy Men”: “On March 7, Perpetua and her companions, encouraging one another to bear bravely whatever pain they might suffer, were sent to the arena to be mangled by a leopard, a boar, a bear, and a savage cow. Perpetua and Felicitas, tossed by the cow, were bruised and disheveled, but Perpetua, ‘lost in spirit and ecstasy,’ hardly knew anything that had happened. To her companions she cried, ‘Stand fast in the faith and love one another.’”

Ultimately, Perpetua and her companions were put to death by soldiers with swords – Perpetua’s soldier being particularly inept. She needed to help the man to guide the sword properly.

“Stand fast in the faith, and love one another,” the last words of Perpetua. Perpetua chose love over survival, self-preservation, and fear, and we admire her – to say the least. Love conquered fear.

As we gather today in this celebration of the Holy Eucharist and re-affirm our ordination vows, we do so in the cultural context of a lot of fear. There is a lot of fear out there: fear for the world itself; fear for the environment; fear for our nation; fear for the economy; fear of the other political party; fear of the other; fear for God’s Church.

There is a lot of fear out there, and if we are honest there is some fear in this room. Am I good enough? Am I talented enough? Am I tough enough? Am I brave enough? Do I have enough gas left in this tank? Will they hate my sermon this week? Will they find out I’m not so spiritual? Will they discover how little I

know? And that's only MY list. The list goes on, and it's in the context of that fear (including our own fears) that we are called to love others.

One of my favorite theologians, Beatrice Bruteau, speaks to what she calls the "terrible, rock-bottom, existential fear" which is the root of sin, and alienates, separates, and divides us from one another.

She says that the only way out "is to be really convinced that someone else IS sustaining you, that you don't have to sustain yourself, that you are already given more affirmation, nurturance, respect, love, life, joy than you can imagine desiring. If you can really BELIEVE that someone else is sustaining you, then all the self-defense operations which result in sins are going to evaporate, because they are no longer needed."

"It is at the moment when you perceive this truth and really accept it, believe yourself to be loved – permit, agree, allow, consent to be loved and sustained by another – it is at this moment that SALVATION takes place. It is when this deep metaphysical need to be loved and sustained is met and satisfied that one's life is really saved, preserved, kept from destruction."

Believe it or not, Dr. Bruteau is a Roman Catholic – not a Southern Baptist. Surely, even those of us Anglicans who know the rote answer that "we have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved," can agree that there is truth in the evangelical perspective.

Dr. Bruteau – hardly a conservative, fundamentalist, evangelical – argues that those who are convinced that they are securely, unconditionally loved and sustained ("saved," as she says) can let go of their defenses, and live the divine life, the abundant life, the risen life.

Jesus says, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."

Those who believe that can move from survival to life. And furthermore, those who believe, those who trust, those who are saved (and perhaps ONLY those) can love others without conditions. Only those who are saved – according to Dr. Bruteau – can love their enemies, for example. Salvation has to come first.

To embody or incarnate the love of Jesus – love without conditions, unmerited grace, unqualified forgiveness, courageous compassion – [to embody such love] without regard for one's self-preservation or survival, salvation has to come first.

We see in Perpetua and her companions – or for that matter, in Jesus of Nazareth – that we might not survive, as the culture understands survival. But we will live.