

ARTICHOKES AND ALLIGATORS
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UUFVB
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Artichokes and Alligators...alright...maybe I have had just a bit too much spiritual time on my hands lately but (as the more relaxed months of summer approach) I have been thinking a lot recently about this amazing and intricate natural world of ours...and how we human beings should understand our place (sometimes our decidedly insignificant place) within the grand scheme of it all. I think it spiritually matters (a great deal, actually) for us “two legged arthropoids” to have a spiritually mature and realistic (and I might add scientifically accurate) understanding of the natural world...and how we (as just one species -- albeit the decidedly dominant species) fit in.

I must admit that what got me thinking along these lines was the stark contrast (that struck me the other day when I was pondering the natural world’s amazing diversity of life) between (of all things) ARTICHOKES and ALLIGATORS:

[PHOTOS AND CAPTION] OF THE ALLIGATOR AND ARTICHOKE ARE PUT UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS, SIDE-BY-SIDE]



Alligator



artichoke

Hey...I warned you...I've had too much free-wheeling spiritual time on my hands lately...my mind has wandered to some rather curious places...but hang with me this morning dear friends, for I assure you there is a useful and coherent sermon in here somewhere!

ARTICHOKES and ALLIGATORS...now by almost any measure...those are two pretty dissimilar things (one from the plant kingdom and one from the animal kingdom) from this curious creation of ours, aren't they? About the only thing they have in common is that THEY ARE BOTH GREEN...AND SCALY AND BUMPY TO THE TOUCH! But here's what put them together in my head...the culinary aspect...or simply put:

- I LOVE TO EAT ARTICHOKE...
- AND ALLIGATORS LOVE TO EAT ME!

Let me start by discussing the friendlier of the two...

Artichokes...

[TWIN PHOTOS OF ARTICHOKE AND ALLIGATOR COME DOWN...PICTURE OF COOKED ARTICHOKE GOES UP]



Artichoke on a dinner plate

are one of my favorite foods in this whole wide world – here you see one on a plate that someone is in the process of devouring! I love steaming them (for an hour or so) in a big pot (with a few cloves of fresh garlic if possible) until they are soft and tender, and then eating them...with drawn butter...one delicious leaf at a time...until I get down to the real culinary reward of the whole experience...the artichoke’s tender and meaty heart (shown here on the left in the photo) ...the succulent and flavorful core...which I carefully cut up with a knife...and similarly bathe each piece in butter until the whole, delicious treat is gone. Artichokes are wonderful, intricate things to slowly eat with family and friends. Peeling apart and eating an artichoke (as a separate course during a meal) gives you time to talk and laugh, and enjoy the camaraderie of an evening even as your taste buds savor this curious and complex green delicacy. In a word, artichokes are AN EXQUISITE AND DELICIOUS GIFT of this amazing creation of ours, and if you haven’t yet discovered what a joy they are to eat, I urge you to try them some dinner soon!

And then, on the other side of the natural equation there are alligators:

[PICTURE OF ARTRICHOKE COMES DOWN, THIS ALLIGATOR PICTURE GOES UP]



One of the most fearsome and ferocious animals on the planet, found (as you all know) in abundance (some million-and-one-half strong) here in the waterways of Florida who will (occasionally) catch (and every once and awhile eat!) unsuspecting humans who make the mistake of not properly respecting their natural habitat!

I say “occasionally” because, when I went on-line to see how many people are killed and eaten by Florida alligators, I was surprised to learn that there have only been 24 deaths (just about one every other year!) caused by alligators in our state since 1973...and only a total of about 400 unprovoked alligator attacks on people (less than 6-per-year!) between 1948 and now – with folks losing limbs and what not. So...alligator attacks (unlike the numerous car accidents that occur in our state – nearly a quarter million crashes with nearly 3,000 annual deaths) alligator attacks are NOT a significant statistical risk to us humans

But the truth remains that to live here in alligator-infested Florida requires that you use great caution when you are in or near the water...for these fierce and hungry (and stealth!) creatures WILL make a meal of you if you give them a chance! I often bike past the Indian River County reclaimed water reservoir West of town that has a delightfully straight-forward warning sign that reads “BE CAREFUL...LARGE ALLIGATORS PRESENT!” Similarly...not too long ago my biking buddy Jake and I came upon a tourist by the side of a pond inching her way with a camera toward a massive 11 foot alligator that was facing her maybe 30 feet away...we yelled with alarm “Too Close...Get back!” and thank God she quickly backed off to safety.

[PICTURE OF ALLIGATOR COMES DOWN, TWIN PICTURES OF ARTTRICHOKE AND ALLIGATOR GOES BACK UP]



So...we interact with artichokes and alligators in very different ways...artichokes are harmless and alligators fiersome...that's rather plain and obvious...so where am I spiritually going with all this? Well...these two disparate natural phenomenon – symbolize for me the curious (and often contradictory) relationships we human beings have with this amazingly complex creation of ours.

There is so much in this world of ours -- so very much – of sheer grace and beauty...blessing and delight...like big, inviting artichokes waiting to be eaten! And (at the self-same time) there is so much in this world – so very much – of absolute danger and destruction, of risk and ugliness...like hungry alligators hiding along a river bank waiting for unsuspecting human beings to wander by! And, in a similar natural vein:

[PICTURE OF TROPICAL SUNSET AND HURRICANE ARE PROJECTED UP SIDE BY SIDE]



on the one hand there are warm and gentle tropical days here on the Treasure Coast (like this picture on the left) that are so hospitable and beautiful one might think he or she had gone to heaven...and (on the other side of nature's hand) there are also dark and harrowing days (like this picture on the right) when hurricanes (or other violent tropical weather) race ashore and unleash unimaginable sorrow and destruction...days that might make one think hell itself had arrived at our doorstep.

[PICTURE OF SUNSET AND HURICANE COME DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]

My point here is that ours is (undeniably) a world of both GRACE and GRUESOMENESS. This mysterious creation gives us (at the same-self moment) both alligators and artichokes...hurricanes and hyacinths...blizzards and blueberries...pancreatic cancer cells and crescent beaches...tornadoes and trumpet swans...rattlesnakes and raspberries!

And so my spiritual question today is: how do we human beings make useful sense of this contradictory and confusing whole -- this blessed yet bedeviling world -- and our place within it? How do we (as human beings living on this natural planet earth) come to spiritual terms with a world that is (in one moment):

- 1) so utterly delicious and divine, and (in the very next moment),
- 2) so destructive and dangerous?

Well...the first thing we must remember (from science classes back in high school and college) is that (despite the fact that human activity now almost totally dominates the planet) very little (of everything that makes up the natural world) is "about us or our human needs." Sure, we human beings have successfully evolved (mostly in terms of neurological complexity and cultural sophistication) in ways that enable us to dominate and control many animal species (everything from mosquitos to cows) and many natural phenomenon (like the flood waters our dams and levees can usually safely channel, and like the forest fires we are usually are able to eventually extinguish). But the natural sciences remind us that every living thing (and all of this world's interconnected natural

phenomenon) have developed the way they have, generally by paying absolutely no attention to our human needs, desires, and wishes...but rather by the inexorably unseen hand of evolution (and other immutable and powerful laws of nature).

[PICTURES OF ALLIGATOR AND ARTICHOKE GOES BACK UP ON THE SCREENS]



Let's just take artichokes and alligators for example. Because Charles Darwin's theory of evolution has been irrefutably proven (by countless scientific experimentations and observations) to be the mechanism by which life changes and develops on this planet over time. We know, for example, that the fact an encounter with an artichoke are so pleasant and satisfying to us today (and conversely that an encounter with an alligator is so unpleasant and dangerous) are merely accidental consequences of these two species (one plant and one animal) evolutionarily pursuing their own survival and success.

"ARTICHOKE-NESS" and "ALLIGATOR-NESS" is not about us...it's about them...and their naturally carving out a niche in creation as best they can.

If I understand Darwin and natural selection right, artichokes:

[TWIN PICTURES OF ALLIGATOR AND ARTICHOKE COME DOWN, PICTURE OF ARTICHOKE FLOWER GOES UP]



(which are the budding flower portion of this perennial plant in the “Thistle” family) have evolved into the intricate pleasure they are simply as a means of ensuring their propagation (and survival) as a plant. The beautiful flower that results from an artichoke (that you see on the screen) is singularly “designed” not to please our palate, but to attract the insects which will pollinate the plant and help it survive and spread.

[PICTURE OF ARTICHOKE BLOSSOM COMES DOWN, ALLIGATOR PICTURE GOES BACK UP]



Similarly, alligators have evolved into the stealth and effective meat-eating creatures (which occupy our Florida waterways) not because they are “out to get us” but simply because they (like all animals including us!) want to eat, survive and produce healthy offspring.

[ALLIGATOR PICTURE COMES DOWN...TWIN ALLIGATOR/ARTICHOKE PICTURES GO BACK UP]



The fact that artichokes seem delicious and intriguing to us (and conversely alligators so abhorrent and terrifying) HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH US -- although those particular natural facts about these two very different “green things” DO MATTER to us! Charles Darwin proved (and the natural sciences have since repeatedly proven) that (over great spans of time) each particular species (suited as it has to its particular habitat) is continuously and simply “doing its own thing” (and naturally adapting and changing) for its survival and success. We human beings (of course) have all kinds of judgments and reactions to the way other plant and animal species seem to us (we despise wasps and rattlesnakes – for example – even as we adore panda bears and bunny rabbits) but none of this means they are “paying any attention” to us...(or being either purposefully “Hostile” or “Hospitable” to us) they are not. So what I’m saying here is that (obviously) we homo sapiens shouldn’t TAKE IT PERSONALLY that artichokes seem wonderful to us and alligators seem wicked...they are essentially indifferent to us, and the niche WE humans are carving out for ourselves in creation .

[TWIN ALLIGATOR/ARTICHOKE PICTURES COME DOWN...RAINBOW AND HURRICANE PICTURES GO UP]



And as it is with plant and animal species, so to it is with ALL natural and weather phenomenon -- like rainbows and hurricanes, for example. Here in Florida, we are regularly uplifted and charmed by rainbows -- when they splash their amazing colors so brightly across the summer sky. And (in the same season!) we are not infrequently terrified and endangered by hurricanes -- when they form far out to sea and race toward our homes here in all their destructive power. But, again, neither of these natural phenomena (of course) is “paying any attention” to human life or needs. Rainbows and hurricanes respectively happen simply because predictable meteorological forces in nature come together in just the right way to make them possible. Although it is increasingly undeniable that we humans (as a major force of nature) are affecting evolution and natural phenomenon -- like the dangerous global warming we have created by burning fossil fuels which may lead to the extinction of thousands upon thousands of plant and animal species that will be unable to adapt quickly enough to the climate change...or when we prevent ecologically helpful prairie fires from burning across the prairies, again negatively affecting hundreds of plant and animal species) of course we affect evolution. But nature (while it evolutionarily responds in predictable mechanisms of change) remains indifferent to our behavior – be it wise or foolish.

Hurricanes, for example, that are (most climate scientists are telling us) are now becoming more frequent and intense in the 21st Century are not out to somehow

“punish” humanity for its folly. The Rev. Pat Robertson (the TV evangelist and talk show host) might believe (as he once proclaimed) that hurricanes veer away from Virginia Beach (where his church is located) and hit New Orleans (where he has concluded human sin abounds) but anyone with more than a kindergarten understanding of science and the laws of nature (not to mention a mature spirituality of respect for all human life) knows that Hurricanes have no such moral or judgmental compass.

Let me bring all this precisely home. When those back-to-back monster hurricanes (Francis and Jean) hit Vero Beach just days apart in 2005...it was NOT because those storms somehow “decided” to “put Vero Beach in the crosshairs” or “target” us, or “make us the bulls-eye.” Nature is not out either to “bless” us (when it gives us artichokes and asparagus to eat) or to “get” us (when random hurricanes wreck havoc on our coastal communities). Nature is absolutely indifferent to our human needs, thoughts, judgments and activities. Again...we human beings DO change and affect things by leaving such a large human footprint on our planet...but nature (whether it be this planet’s plants, animals or weather) doesn’t [quote, unquote] “CARE” or “CHOOSE” to act for human bane or benefit. Just as it has since the beginning of time, nature (in all its myriad forms and manifestations) is just blindly being itself, following its immutable laws to their natural and inevitable conclusion.

So...[follow my logic here]...I believe it is as silly for someone to say, “That rainbow was put in the sky to bless me with hope today,” as it is for a TV weatherperson to say (as they routinely do) “This hurricane has put The Gulf Coast in its cross-hairs...it’s painted a bulls eye right on Pascagoula, and is coming after us!!” The hurricane and rainbow could care less about us, they’re just doing the only thing they can, being their “rainbow” and “hurricane” selves by the sure and fixed laws of nature...so people should not (spiritually speaking) take either THE BLESSINGS OF NATURE (nor THE BLOWS OF NATURE) PERSONALLY.

[TWIN PICTURES OF RAINBOW AND HURRICANE COME DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]

I don't often make references in sermons that relate to my being a gay male...but we have an expression in the gay male community that applies here. When someone (in gay male circles) is making a big drama about their life or something that has happened to them, someone will inevitably blurt out, "Oh, for God's sake Mary, don't flatter yourself, this isn't about you!" [CONGREGATION LAUGHS] What I am trying to affirm here this morning is that during our lifetimes on this planet we mustn't take nature's phenomenon (either the wonderful or the painful) PERSONALLY...because nature is ABSOLUTELY AND ETERNALLY INDIFFERENT to our human needs, desires and perceptions. The natural world is not (I am passionately persuaded) spinning out some sort of "grand or purposeful plan" for human beings – neither as a species, nor as individuals...the flow of natural life (both in its gracious dimensions and its gruesome ones) really isn't "about us!" And the sooner we understand and accept that, the sooner we come to a mature spiritual understanding that can help us through life's good and bad times.

[PAUSE...]

I have a ministerial colleague in Michigan (a previously totally healthy woman in her mid-fifties) who recently had a very unexpected and terrifying cerebral hemorrhage that suddenly threatened her life. Now blessedly, this colleague has (over recent months) made a fast and full recovery, and has been told that in all likelihood she will never again experience such a life threatening cerebral event. With cerebral hemorrhages, it seems that sometimes, in some individuals, often for reasons the doctors can not exactly pin down or explain, blood vessels in the brain suddenly break...it is an anomalous-and-dangerous medical event that naturally happens to many thousands of persons each year...and that is how we should understand them...as anomalous and unpredictable NATURAL events. But when I was recently discussing this medical scare with her, my colleague mentioned that one of the most upsetting parts of her recovery was having some friends and family (all be them, God knows, well-meaning and sincere) repeatedly express their belief that the blood vessel burst in her head [quote] "for a

reason...for a purpose.” In other words, people around her were suggesting that this scary and life threatening natural medical event was a part of some “grand spiritual plan” to help her become the kind of human being she is supposed to come (you know, more grateful for the gift of life...or more patient with her husband or her children...or closer to God...or more mindful of the gifts of her life...whatever). My colleague (fully aware of the straightforward scientific -- and natural -- reasons why she had the hemorrhage) was spiritually furious that people would ascribe such “meaning” to a meaningless natural event...or “purpose” to a random event that is “purposeless” ...and I too think this kind of thinking is unscientific, AND spiritually and emotionally unsustainable (not to mention hurtful and offensive). Again...rainbows do NOT appear across the sky to “signal love or purpose” (or even to brighten your day)...and hurricanes do NOT make landfall precisely where they strike to “punish your human sinfulness” ...nor do blood vessels burst in some of our brains “to make us better people who more fully appreciate the gift of life.”

Now please hear this loud and clear...Such appreciation (and spiritual growth) MIGHT IN FACT result from seeing a rainbow, facing a medical crisis or surviving a terrible storm)...I have known plenty of people who have survived heart attacks or cancer surgery or a powerful tornado only to (indeed) have a keenly renewed appreciation for life and loved ones. But that good spiritual and emotional outcome is not “why” the heart attack (or cancer) occurred. Nature (including that which constantly expresses itself in our own bodies) is again “doing its own thing” ...indifferent to our thoughts, needs, and development as persons. And we had best understand this as we tread our way through the lifetimes that are ours.

[PAUSE...]

A few years ago, one of my best friends in the world

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF DR. PAUL GORDON IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREENS]



Dr. Paul Gordon

(I have talked about him before) -- a wonderful guy named Paul who was a skilled veterinarian and all-around wonderful husband and father and human – was diagnosed with a terribly aggressive and malignant tumor in his back and spine...a cancer that, after several years of struggle, eventually took his life. Paul (ever the hard-nosed, rational scientist) was very philosophical about his illness...an illness he nonetheless fought with every ounce of his strength and heart. Whenever we discussed the cancer that was spreading through his body and robbing him of his mobility, freedom and strength, Paul refused (absolutely spiritually refused!) to take any of the natural tragedy of what was happening to him personally. He refused to ever even entertain the question (which so many people who get sick want to ask) the “WHY ME?” question. Paul knew that (in our natural – and chaotic - creation) human cells sometimes mutate and become cancerous and attack the host body, and that that was precisely (and only!) what was happening to him. He did not believe he got the cancer to “facilitate his spiritual growth,” or to “help him get closer to his wife and children” or to somehow

become “a better or wiser person.” He believed he got cancer because – well -- he randomly got cancer...period. And Paul – as I – refused to believe that nature was somehow purposefully injecting itself spiritually into his life. One of the worst (and I believe most utterly unscientific and illogical) ideas (that you unfortunately hear expressed again and again and again in this culture) is that everything in the natural world happens for “a larger purpose or reason” because it is all part of “A master plan.” I for one do not see how this could possibly be so! As I have said again and again this morning (in as many ways as I know how to say it)

Nature...disease...weather...animals...everything in the natural world...operates by rules that have little (or nothing) to do with us. Now...when we human beings are confronted with natural adversity and destructiveness (natural events like hurricanes, floods, alligators or cancer) because we are “meaning-making” creatures, we may well find life and purpose and energy (even new insight and wisdom) into our lives and how we are living them...but these natural phenomenon are indifferent to the contexts of meaning and purpose we human make.

But – and this is really where I want to leave you spiritually this morning, dear friends -- this deep and eternal indifference that nature has toward us does not mean that life on this planet is meaningless...or purposeless...or without hope. Nor does it mean we shouldn’t love and cherish both the natural world in which we find ourselves, and the lives we so tenderly hold onto. The fact that life and nature are neither out to “bless” or “batter” us does NOT mean that we cannot love the world, and the amazing opportunity we have to live our lives, build relationships and weave wondrous meaning (and JOY) into our lives. This creation, indifferent as it is, is nonetheless a sacred place where we are free to find life-sustaining purpose, meaning, love and joy.

One of the last times I saw my friend Paul alive was a beautiful summer evening, when Collins and I – returning home from a car trip through New England – stopped in to Millington, New Jersey, to have dinner and the evening with my friend and his wife. We

talked all night on their magical, candle-lit screened-in porch, deep in the woods, in a beautiful rural part of New Jersey...and talked about what Paul was facing. Several times (on that soft and lovely evening tinged with so much human sadness) this wise and precise and spiritual and scientific man said (in several different ways) "Well...THERE IT IS...I always knew this could happen...my cancer is back...my prognosis is not good...but THERE IT IS...I have not been singled out...this is just a bit of bad personal luck...and I have to live as best and as joyfully and fully as I can amidst all these uncertainties...for I still have life, and my family, and will always, always cherish this world."

And that is where I want to spiritually leave you this morning, dear friends. WE MUST LOVE THIS WORLD. We must love this world with its curious and indifferent mix of artichokes and alligators...raspberries, rattlesnakes...beautiful summer clouds and terrible tornadoes. WE MUST LOVE THIS WORLD NOT because it promises us endless days filled exclusively with rainbows, blueberries and gentle summer rains. We must love this world because it is the holy, uncertain and amazing workshop where we shape our lives into works of purpose, meaning, satisfaction and love (amidst all the confusion and contradiction and trouble). Some spiritually might imagine that they can wait for some OTHER...BETTER...NEXT creation which will promise them all ARTICHOKEs and no ALLIGATORS. But the spiritually wise know (quiet to their hearts) that it is in THIS AMBIVALENT WORLD (indifferent to us as it eternally is) it is in this world that we must build our heavens, find our holiness, and sing the songs we were meant to sing. Right here...Right now...Amen.