

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

First Sunday after Pentecost – June 11, 2017

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Psalm 8

For Reflection

**You are a child of the universe,
no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.
And whether or not it is clear to you,
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.**

~ from "Desiderata" (Latin: "desired things") 1927 prose poem
by Max Ehrmann (1872–1945) American author

What Are Human Beings?

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; 4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? - Psalm 8

“What are human beings?” Good question. Ancient question. A question that almost answers itself in the asking: Human beings are the creatures that have the capacity to ponder such a question.

But we may not be the only ones that do this – I would guess that whales have a similar capacity. Like humans, they make music, they talk with each other, they have a social life and care for one another. Who’s to say they don’t ask the question, “What are whales?”

However, there are other things that scientists and philosophers have determined to be markers of being human. Keep in mind that most mammals have a self-interest which translates into survival mechanisms. Our human propensity to think highly of ourselves may just be a natural phenomenon. But it is an interesting thought exercise – do explore what differentiates us from other creatures – and offers us the belief that whoever or whatever created us cares more for us than for our other (lesser) siblings.

Charles Q. Choi, Live Science Contributor, suggests “Top 10 Things That Make Humans Special.”

Speech: Human ancestors evolved a descended larynx roughly 350,000 years ago. We also possess a descended hyoid bone — this horseshoe-shaped bone below the tongue, unique in that it is not attached to any other bones in the body, allows us to articulate words when speaking.

Upright Posture: Humans are unique among the primates in how walking fully upright is our chief mode of locomotion. This frees our hands up for using tools.

Nakedness: We look naked compared to our hairier ape cousins.

Surprisingly...a square inch of human skin on average possesses as much hair-

producing follicles as other primates, or more — humans often just have thinner, shorter, lighter hairs.

Clothing: Humans may be called "naked apes," but most of us wear clothing, a fact that makes us unique in the animal kingdom, save for the clothing we make for other animals.

Extraordinary Brains: Without a doubt, the human trait that sets us apart the most from the animal kingdom is our extraordinary brain. Humans don't have the largest brains in the world — those belong to sperm whales. We don't even have the largest brains relative to body size — many birds have brains that make up more than 8 percent of their body weight, compared to only 2.5 percent for humans. Yet the human brain, weighing only about 3 pounds when fully grown, give us the ability to reason and think on our feet beyond the capabilities of the rest of the animal kingdom, and provided the works of Mozart, Einstein and many other geniuses.

Hands: ...humans are not the only animals to possess opposable thumbs — most primates do...What makes humans unique is how we can bring our thumbs all the way across the hand to our ring and little fingers. We can also flex the ring and little fingers toward the base of our thumb. **This gives humans a powerful grip and exceptional dexterity to hold and manipulate tools with.**

Fire: The human ability to control fire would have brought a semblance of day to night, helping our ancestors to see in an otherwise dark world and keep nocturnal predators at bay. [Fire] helped people stay warm in cold weather, enabling us to live in cooler areas. And...it gave us cooking, which some researchers suggest influenced human evolution...

Blushing: Humans are the only species known to blush, a behavior Darwin called "the most peculiar and the most human of all expressions." It remains uncertain why people blush, involuntarily revealing our innermost emotions...The most common idea is that blushing **helps keep people honest, benefiting the group as a whole.**

Long (Annoying) Childhoods: Humans must remain in the care of their parents for much longer than other living primates...The explanation may be our large brains, which presumably require a long time to grow and learn.

Life after Children: Most animals reproduce until they die, but in humans, females can survive long after ceasing reproduction. This might be due to the social bonds seen in humans — in extended families, **grandparents can help ensure the success of their families long after they themselves can have children.**

<https://www.livescience.com/15689-evolution-human-special-species.html>

Editor's Note: This presentation was originally published in 2011. It was updated in March, 2016.

Thomas Suddendorf, Professor of Psychology at the University of Queensland in Australia, offers us some perspective on our mental uniqueness:

Our minds have spawned civilizations and technologies that have changed the face of the Earth, while even our closest living animal relatives sit unobtrusively in their remaining forests...

...One of the key characteristics that makes us human appears to be that we can think about alternative futures and make deliberate choices accordingly. Creatures without such a capacity cannot be bound into a social contract and take moral responsibility. Once we become aware about what we cause, however, we may feel morally obliged to change our ways. So be aware, then, that all species of apes are under threat of extinction through human activity. We are the only species on this planet with the foresight capable of deliberately plotting a path toward a desirable long-term future. Plan it for the apes; because they can't.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/thomas-suddendorf/what-makes-us-human_b_4414357.html

THE BLOG 12/09/2013 03:25 pm ET | Updated Feb 08, 2014

Thomas Suddendorf, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at the University of Queensland in Australia

Melissa Hogenboom, Science Journalist for the BBC, elaborates on the mental capabilities that set us apart:

Ever since we learned to write, we have documented how special we are. The philosopher Aristotle marked out our differences over 2,000 years ago. **We are "rational animals" pursuing knowledge for its own sake. We live by art and reasoning, he wrote...**we see the roots of many behaviours once considered uniquely human in our closest relatives, chimpanzees and bonobos. **But we are the only ones who peer into their world and write books about it...**

It is likely that we have our big brain to thank that we exist at all. When we – Homo sapiens – first appeared about 200,000 years ago we weren't alone. We shared the planet at least four other upright cousins; Neanderthals, Denisovans, the "hobbit" Homo floresiensis and a mysterious fourth group.

Evidence in the form of stone tools suggests that for about 100,000 years our technology was very similar to the Neanderthals. **But 80,000 years ago something changed.**

"The Neanderthals had an impressive but basically routine material record for a hominid. Once H. sapiens started behaving in a strange, [more sophisticated] way, all hell broke loose and change became the norm..."

We started to produce superior cultural and technological artefacts. Our stone tools became more intricate...We started to assign symbolic values to objects such as geometrical designs on plaques and cave art.

There is little evidence that any other hominins made any kind of art

Somehow, our language-learning abilities were gradually "switched on"...In the same way that early birds developed feathers before they could fly, we had the mental tools for complex language before we developed it.

We started with language-like symbols as a way to represent the world around us...before you say a word, your brain first has to have a symbolic representation of what it means. These mental symbols eventually led to language in all its complexity and the ability to process information is the main reason we are the only hominin still alive...

It's not clear exactly when speech evolved, or how. But it seems likely that it was partly driven by another uniquely human trait: **our superior social skills.**

Comparative studies between humans and chimps show that while both will cooperate, humans will always help more. Children seem to be innate helpers. They act selflessly before social norms set in. Studies have shown that they will spontaneously open doors for adults and pick up "accidentally" dropped items. They will even stop playing to help. Their sense of fairness begins young. Even if an experiment is unfairly rigged so that one child receives more rewards, they will ensure a reward is fairly split...

Something must have happened in our evolution...to make humans increasingly reliant on each other. Our brains needed fuel to get bigger and so collaborative hunting may have played a key role in that. Our advanced teamwork may simply reflect our long history of working together to get food... [No] other species were as hyper cooperative as we are today.

These cooperative skills are closely tied to our incredible mind reading skills. We understand what others think based upon our knowledge of the world, but we also understand what others cannot know.

If something happens while someone is out of the room, we understand that they cannot know what went on in that room while absent. They can create "false beliefs" about what happened.

While we are not the only creatures who understand that others have intentions and goals, "we are certainly unique in the level of abstractness with which we can reason about others' mental states..."

We [also] have a fundamental urge to link our minds together. "This allows us to take advantage of others' experiences, reflections and imaginings to prudently guide our own behaviour...We link our scenario-building minds into larger networks of knowledge." [aka "hive mind" – aka "The Borg"] This in turn helps us to accumulate information through many generations.

...As far as we know, we are the only creatures trying to understand where we came from. We also peer further back in time, and further into the future, than any other animal. What other species would think to ponder the age of the universe, or how it will end?"

<http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20150706-the-small-list-of-things-that-make-humans-unique>

The traits that make human beings unique

By Melissa Hogenboom 6 July 2015

Which brings us back to our Hebrew ancestors in faith – wondering “what are human beings that you [G-D] are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” There are other animals who engage in rituals – but are there other animals who have beliefs about a Creator – a larger force in the universe that is or is not mindful of them?

[Scientists] said their findings support the idea that the [human] brain has evolved to be sensitive to any form of belief that improves the chances of survival, which could explain why a belief in God and the supernatural became so widespread in human evolutionary history...

Scientists are divided on whether religious belief has a biological basis. **Some evolutionary theorists have suggested that Darwinian natural selection may have put a premium on individuals if they were able to use religious belief to survive hardships that may have overwhelmed those with no religious convictions.**

Others have suggested that religious belief is a side effect of a wider trait in the human brain to search for coherent beliefs about the outside world.

Religion and the belief in God, they argue, are just a manifestation of this intrinsic, biological phenomenon that makes the human brain so intelligent and adaptable.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/belief-and-the-brains-god-spot-1641022.html>

Belief and the brain's 'God spot' Tuesday 10 March 2009 00:00 GMT

This idea that our belief in G-d helps us to survive hardships – and we have a propensity for “hive mind” – sharing our ideas and experiences in order to have greater understanding – explains why religion is mainly a **community** practice. It gives credence to our sense of gathering at a base camp to strengthen ourselves for the climb of life the rest of the week.

Here is where we can ponder the great questions, create a record of our lives and discoveries through language and art, establish a Beloved Community where sharing and cooperation are modeled for our young.

Our ancestors in faith wrote:

**3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?**

We assert that we are G-d's children – made as G-d intended us to be in every way. We are beloved and cherished – and are called to share this belief with others – through language and art – through choices we make and social contracts that are just and compassionate – through our respectful and loving relationships with all lifeforms that share this creation.

What are human beings? We are. Thanks be to G-d.

Scripture Reading for Sunday June 11, 2017 – Pentecost 1 – Year A

Psalm 8

1 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. 2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. **3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; 4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?** 5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. 6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, 7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. 9 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!