

Big Dog Man's Other Best Friend

By
Todd F. Eklof
May 4, 2008

By the time the Native Americans arrived on the scene, horses no longer existed in the Americas. It wasn't until the 1500's that they were reintroduced on the continent by invading Conquistadors. Since they had never seen such animals before they often coined their own words for the animal. My favorite is the Cree word, *mistatim*, which simply means, "big dog." I imagine if I had never heard of or seen such a creature before, yet had plenty of dogs running around my village, I would also take one look and say, "Wow, that's a big dog!" But eventually the Native Americans became very familiar with the horse and went so far as to invent stories of how they discovered it for themselves. One of those stories is about a young boy whose people are starving because the buffalo have become scarce and have not come near his village for many moons. He embarks on a vision quest whereupon he encounters the big dog, mounts its back, and returns to his people. With this discovery his people are able to travel long distances to hunt buffalo and to carry their prey back home again.

This story really says it all when it comes to the relationship between human and horse. The horse allowed humans to become more mobile, both because they can carry us great distances, and because they can pack our stuff. To this day we still refer to the strength of our automobiles in terms of horsepower, a single unit being equal to 746 watts of electricity, or the strength to lift 550 pounds with each step. So, in many ways, the domestication of horse liberated people from sedentary life, which was especially important when their environment became inhospitable or unpredictable, perhaps threatened by drought or foreign invaders. If circumstances required it, people with horses could pack up and move.

But there is a tremendous shadow side of the story that shouldn't be neglected. The domestication of horses, in addition to making us more mobile, made our species more violent and oppressive. About three thousand years before horses were reintroduced to the, so called, "New World," human society had remained mostly peaceful, perhaps because cooperation with others was most advantageous to the individual's survival. In a world without banks, or barns, or even closets, amassing resources was difficult and private property was pointless. So, in order to survive, people had to share their skills and resources together. But all of this changed, as Walter Wink points out, with the horse. "Prior to the domestication of the horse," he writes, "plunder had been unrewarding, since one was forced to carry the loot on one's own back. The horse and the wheel suddenly made conquest fantastically lucrative."¹

¹ Wink, Walter, *The Powers that Be*, A Galilee Book, Doubleday, Random House, Inc., New York, NY, 1998, 1999, p. 40.

In her book, *The Great Transformation*, Karen Armstrong makes a similar point in describing the transformation of the ancient Aryans, who originated as pastoralists on the steppes of southern Russia, from a peaceful to a warrior society. Prior to this change, she writes, “It was a quiet, sedentary existence. The Aryans could not travel far, because the horse had not yet been domesticated, so their horizons were bounded by the steppes. They farmed their land, herded their sheep, goats, and pigs, and valued stability and continuity. They were not warlike people, since, apart from a few skirmishes with one another or with rival groups, they had no enemies and no ambition to conquer new territory.”² In addition to having a relatively peaceful life, they also held a rather peaceful mindset. As Armstrong goes on to explain, “Their religion was simple and peaceful. Like other ancient peoples, the Aryans experienced an invisible force within themselves and in everything that they saw, heard, and touched.”³ They did not feel separate from others, their environment, or other creatures.

But, in order to justify their cruelty toward others, which came with their newfound horsepower, they had to change their religious beliefs. “The old Aryan religion had preached reciprocity, self-sacrifice, and kindness to animals,” Armstrong explains, “This was no longer that appealing to the cattle rustlers, whose hero was the dynamic Indra, the dragon slayer, who rode in a chariot upon the clouds of heaven. Indra was now the divine model to whom the raiders aspired.”⁴ And when your god is a warrior, war becomes your highest good, and those who aren’t warriors, or are too weak to defend themselves, deserve to be oppressed and mistreated for being so ungodly. Plunder on horseback, for example, included the capture of women as slaves, concubines, and wives, although male captives were usually killed, leading to an abundance of women. “The numerical excess of females,” Wink explains, “depreciated the value of all females, and the system of patriarchy was either born or sharply expanded.”⁵ He goes on to say that, “As warfare became the central preoccupation of states, taxation became necessary in order to support a standing army, a warrior cast, and an aristocracy.”⁶

So there you have it, the domestication of horses may have carried us farther and faster than we could have gone on our own, but we’re now carrying a lot more baggage as a result. Violence is now a positive value, and the toughest, roughest, meanest among us, our warriors, are often heralded as our greatest heroes and leaders. It’s okay to exploit the weaknesses of others because they deserve it. It’s fine to rob others of the benefits of their own labor because “to the victor goes the spoils of victory.” Yes, oppression, theft, slavery, discrimination, war, hierarchy, patriarchy, elitism, domination, sexism, even taxes have come into our lives on horseback.

But the point here is not to suggest that horses should not have been domesticated, or that human civilization should remain sedentary and never progress. My real point

² Armstrong, Karen, *The Great Transformation*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2006, p. 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵ Wink, *ibid.*

⁶ Ibid.

today is to make us more open to looking at the shadow side of our behavior and beliefs, and I thought, given that it's the day after the Kentucky Derby, exploring our historical relationship with the horse might be a good springboard for such a discussion.

This morning's newspaper headline, for example, read, in gigantic letters, "Big Brown Delivers," referring to yesterday's Derby winner. Beneath it, in much smaller, more muted letters, was the subtext, "Fatal injury to runner-up filly Eight Belles a tragic ending." The font-size of these dramatically different headlines suggests we shouldn't let the dark side of horseracing overshadow our celebration of it. But the truth is, Eight Belles, the filly who came in second in the race, broke both her front legs under the crushing force of her own weight when she came to a stop and had to be immediately euthanized. Despite all the rhetoric by those in the horseracing industry about how much these animals enjoy their lives, about their natural instinct for competition, and their love for running, thoroughbred horses have massive bodies with spindly legs, which is why their most common injuries are to their legs. And if they really love the competition of racing so much, why must their jockey's whip them to the finish line? Why do they need jockeys at all, for that matter?

But, again, my point today is not to condemn horseracing. In fact, it isn't even about horses. It's about taboo. It's about going places we're not supposed to go, and touching upon matters that are forbidden. In his classic manuscript, *Totem and Taboo*, Sigmund Freud explained that, "taboo expresses itself essentially in prohibitions and restrictions. Our combination of 'holy dread' would often express the meaning of taboo."⁷ In short, taboo is that which we're afraid to talk about, or that which others forbid us to bring up. And, as Freud's title suggests, it's usually associated with totem animals, which is defined, in part, as the animal with which a society of people identify themselves. Some of our more primitive ancestors named their tribes after their totems, and considered themselves related to it. At the same time, the totem inspired awe, or "holy dread," which made it forbidden to touch, kill, or eat the totem animal, except perhaps, under strict ritualistic guidelines.

I'd say, here in Louisville, home of the Kentucky Derby, the thoroughbred horse is about as close to a totem as modern people can have, and talking negatively about horseracing is a local taboo. But totem and taboo, as Freud pointed out so long ago, are part of the primitive world, of the under-developed psyche, and have no place in a truly advanced culture.

But, again, to move beyond the example of horses and horseracing, let me illustrate with a different kind of race, the race for the democratic nomination that has recently vilified the former pastor of candidate Barack Obama, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, for saying things that we are, at least according to the national news media, not supposed say. I neither condemn nor condone the words of Reverend Wright, especially in light of the sound-bites I heard from his recent performance at a press conference. He does seem to be an extremely angry man; and, I think, justifiably

⁷ Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo*, Barnes & Noble, New York, NY, 2005, 1913, p.17.

so. Rev. Wright is of a generation that experienced first hand the many systemic injustices done to blacks by a predominantly white society, injustices too gruesome and heinous to go into here. Moreover, as a pastor, it is likely he took on the additional emotional burden of often feeling outraged, helpless, and grieved over the abuses his black church members experienced during an era of overt racism in this country. Now, although such discrimination and abuse against blacks in the U.S. is less overt (notwithstanding the disproportionate and alarming rate at which young black men are being incarcerated), we cannot expect someone Wright's age to fully put the trauma of his past behind him.

In my opinion, all of us are a little neurotic, meaning, as I define it, all of us tend to treat, at times, the present as if it were the past. In other words, we sometimes relate emotionally and psychologically to current events as if they were an event from the past. Let's say, for example, a person asks a friend to have dinner, or to go to a movie, but the friend doesn't have the time. If this person felt abandoned, neglected, or unwanted as a child, he or she may take offense at the friend's unavailability and feel emotionally wounded. These feelings, however, would have more to do with the past, with post-traumatic stress, than with the present. Undoubtedly there have been many changes in our society the past generation regarding how "whites" and "blacks" relate. Perhaps, though certainly not exclusively, or in every situation, it is easier for minorities of Obama's generation to deal more realistically with the present circumstances, than those like Wright who are emotionally fixated on the past, albeit for good reason.

More importantly though, is the fact that regardless of what Wright has been criticized for saying, he seems to have an impeccable background. He served as a both a U.S. Marine and in the Navy, and received a letter of gratitude for his service on behalf of President Lyndon B. Johnson. Even more significant, as a minister he has translated his outrage into action on behalf of the poor in his community, creating numerous social services to help people; albeit difficult to find a list of these accomplishments on the Internet or in the news because everybody is talking about what he's said rather than what he's done.

For me actions always speak louder than words. It's not so as much about what a person says, about how a person feels, but how one translates one's thoughts and feelings into action. Gandhi said, "Anger is the beginning of justice." Some may use their anger to justify violence against others, but others may use it as inspiration to make the world more just. Despite anything he's said, by all accounts I can find, Rev. Wright seems to be the sort of person whose anger has motivated him to make positive changes on behalf of those he feels have been marginalized by the mainstream. It just goes to show that our culture is more concerned with *dogma* than *pragma*, with faith than action, with ideas and rhetoric than with behavior. To me, Rev. Wright, like any of us, should only be condemned for unjust behavior, not for his ideas, no matter how much I might agree or disagree with them. As he himself complained to Bill Moyers during a recent interview, "They know nothing about the church. They know nothing about our prison ministry. They know nothing about our food-sharing ministry. They know nothing about our senior citizens home."

Yet, no matter how frustrated Rev. Wright may be that no one is paying attention to such worthy endeavors, the truth is that our nation is only obsessed with the fact that he has eaten the forbidden fruit, that he has killed the sacred cow, touched upon issues that are considered taboo. And like anyone who does so, he has become unclean, and it is now necessary for us to shun him and demonize him, which is accomplished nowadays through the mainstream media which discredits a person by choosing sound clips that, especially when taken out of context, make one seem crazy. This is the same reason conservative propagandists like Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson have respectively called Al Gore “unhinged” and a “wild-eyed religious nut” for expressing his “inconvenient truth” about global warming. To portray him as unstable, as a madman, as a nutcase, is an effort to invalidate his message, which, until very recently has remained taboo in the mainstream media, despite the fact that scientists have been warning us about it since the 1950’s.

In the case of Rev. Wright, he’s being vilified for saying certain things the media suggests makes him crazy. He has expressed his rage by saying, “God damn America,” his mistrust of the powers-that-be by suggesting AIDS was created by the government, his continued mistrust of whites by saying, “Louis Farrakhan is not my enemy. He did not put me in chains. He did not put me in slavery,” and lots of other forbidden sentiments demonstrative of his continuing hostility and paranoia rooted deep in his past.

What I’m trying to do here is to expose our society's collective desire to shun all criticism of itself. To suggest Barack Obama or any candidate is not suited for office because he can be associated with someone who has taboo feelings about our culture is absurd. Certainly the U.S. has a sorted past, and a sinister side to this day. It has been and continues to be involved in grave injustices against other countries, as well as its own citizens. The U.S. has a terrible shadow that prompts the paranoid angry reactions of men like Rev. Wright, and Osama bin Laden for that matter (although I’m not linking the two of them together). And when men like him speak we ought to listen. We ought to try to ascertain what truth might exist beneath the surface of such angry words. Is it not a fact that the U.S. exterminated this land's previous inhabitants? Is it not true that it allowed slavery and, later, systemic discrimination against minorities? Against women? Is it not true that it has conducted secret radiation experiments on its own citizens? Is it not true that it dropped atomic weapons on two heavily populated cities? Is it not true that it currently accounts for only 5 percent of the world's population, yet uses 30 percent of its resources, and creates most of its pollution? Is it not true that in the wealthiest nation on Earth tens of millions, including 11 million children, are without healthcare?

Alas, these questions only scratch upon the surface of such injustice. Even now, as the scientific community is calling upon us to immediately stop producing biodiesel in order to dramatically lower food prices during a global food shortage, the U.S. President, George W. Bush, has, as is typical, put profit above people, by saying this would hurt American interests. Where is the conservative compassion he promised so long ago? At a time like this, when food is scarce for nearly a billion people around the world, we need to do as our scientists advise, not follow the insatiable lusts of madman! Or am I the

madman for speaking such taboo?

When we focus only on the positive headline, on words and sentiments that are not forbidden, on the good effects of mobility, power, and advancement, we choose to live in ignorance. If we want to carry bags on horseback, then we must sometimes look at the baggage we're carrying. Taboo is a sign of a primitive society, not an advanced culture. We should not condemn people for speaking taboo by demonizing them in the media. We should, like Jesus, work to set them free of their demons, by, legitimizing their feelings of anger and fear, helping them find forgiveness and love, while working with them to promote a more just and compassionate world.