

May 28, 2017

What I Learned from the opossum

The other night I woke up around midnight to the barking of neighborhood dogs; I got up and peeked out my back door. There, on my porch, was some creature eating the food I had put out for a visiting cat. Atop a gardening cabinet next to the back door sat the cat, peering down at the creature while it ate.

"*What in tarnation is that?*" the cat whispered to me.

"It's an opossum!" I realized as I focused through the dim light.

"Sure is an ugly thing," the cat said.

"*Speak for yourself,*" the opossum muttered without looking up. "You're not exactly a matinee idol."

The cat looked at me, embarrassed. As a rule, I try to avoid negative comments about *anyone*. Not only does it eliminate the possibility of embarrassment and a guilt-trip, but it helps keep the soul from getting grimy.

"Did you know that we're (*munch, munch*) nearly 10 times less likely to carry rabies than dogs?" the opossum said as it ate. "Or (*munch, munch*) that we're immune to rattlesnake venom?"

"Sorry," the cat said. "That was rude of me."

"Just don't go taking on any rattlers (*much, munch*)." The marsupial continued chewing as he looked up at the cat and saw my face in the doorway. He swallowed a mouthful of cat food. "Ah, good stuff," he said, "although I prefer Friskies."

I was beginning to like the thing. He had personality. I'd never really considered the opossum. They just seem so foreign, a totally different culture. But now that I was talking with one, I found I'd taken an instant liking to him. Another reason not to judge.

"Don't worry about it, the comment I mean," he said. "That's actually one of the nicer things people have said about me."

"I don't mean to be nosy, but what do people say?" I asked.

"It's okay. I'm pretty nosy myself. *Heh*. Get it? I mean, look at this schnoz! Anyhow, I think it's the rat tail, our bald face and sharp teeth. That alone is enough to freak people out, but in addition to that, people think we're cowards, playing dead and all."

"I've always wondered what happens when you do that, you know, play ... uh ... *possum*," I said. I wondered if I'd just insulted him. I hoped not. He seemed like a nice guy. "You just lay down and close your eyes?"

"Nah, we go out like a light," he explained. "Our bodies curl up like we just passed to the Great Beyond. We even secrete a ... well, *not while I'm eating*. We wake up about 10 minutes later. Not only is there no more enemy, but we've had a good nap. There's really no bad side."

The cat spoke up. "Doesn't it embarrass you to go all *arrrrrgggghhh* [the cat hangs its tongue out and pretends to fall over] every time you face an enemy?"

I was starting to wonder if the cat wasn't being a little passive-aggressive. It was completely unwarranted. I had enough cat food for everyone, and there was plenty of room in Spearville for both species. It was like the cat had a chip on its shoulder.

As another general rule, before I talk to anyone with whom I have a beef--before I even step out my door--I knock that chip off my shoulder. It changes your attitude. Suddenly you're not confrontational, you're more ... *conversational*.

"The only time I was embarrassed was when it happened at a party," the opossum said. "There was this joker, Jeff, who dressed up like a fox and jumped out of a closet. When I woke up, I was dressed in a tutu."

"But generally speaking, playing dead is what keeps us alive. What would happen if two armies advanced on each other, and the first time there was a loud noise, everybody dropped like a bag of wet laundry? You can't fight a war if the armies keep going to sleep."

"I take your point, but isn't that just a little simplistic?" the cat asked. "Tolstoy said, 'The two most powerful warriors are patience and time.' If people don't make *a conscious decision not to fight*, then you can be sure that they'll find a way to destroy each other or die trying."

Wow. I was starting to feel a little intimidated.

The opossum was quiet for a moment. After a pause, he said, "In the '*Art of War*,' author Sun Tzu writes that 'the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.' The trick is how to subdue an enemy without subjugating it."

I thought about it for a minute. "Christ said, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' It's not about winning the war, it's about winning them over. Then you don't worry about subduing or subjugating. America has often been called to sacrifice its own for the liberation of others. For this we can be very proud."

The opossum nodded his head. The cat just licked his paw, but I knew he was listening. Cats are like that.

“Loving your enemies isn’t merely a rule to see if you are worthy of Heaven, it’s an instruction on how to obtain peace while still on Earth. God would like nothing more than for us all to be happy. The only way we will have an enduring peace is if everyone accepts into their heart and soul this most simple, and yet most profound of all teachings--to love one another.”