

CONFESSIONS – BIOPHILE 8 - MAY 2008

Do animals lie? That is the question at issue in this issue. And it's a question that has occupied a fair amount of my attention in the past couple of months. Like many humanoids, when my faith in Homo sapiens has been profoundly disappointed, I tend to seek solace in what I perceive to be the honesty and unconditional loyalty of my animal friends. But am I delusional in hoping that the non-humans in my life are also motivated by nothing but self-interest?

It has been my great misfortune in this most horribilis of anni to share my destiny with two members of that renowned hunting fraternity – The Great White Liars. Of course, the purveyors of 'The Secret' and its ilk would have it that I've attracted these most skilled stalkers into my realm, and while I don't deny that Gullible Gertie here had something important to learn from them, I say 'bah humbug!' to the notion that I unconsciously (but deliberately) sought them out. And as I lick my wounds and pick their bird-shot from my heart and my professional reputation, I wonder if other life-forms on earth are designed to feign and feint their way through existence – driven by the great rewards that deception often brings.

So I turn to the literature and I find, to my further disillusionment, that the animal kingdom abounds with examples of pre-meditated efforts to screw, chew or eschew the chaps next door. Sighting a predator on the horizon, a springbok, for instance, will break into maniacal pronking and other displays of athleticism. Only in part is this a manifestation of fear. Nor is it an altruistic attempt to take the heat and draw attention away from his clan. Quite the opposite in fact - he's trying to show how difficult he would be to kill. "Choose my buddy for lunch" he's saying, "I'll give you no end of trouble if you take *me* on."

Similarly, a fledgling has been shown to squawk as loudly and vociferously when its belly is full as when it's empty - just to draw its parent's attention away from its siblings. In the rough-and-tumble survival race of the fittest it seems that not even those who share the same genes will escape being nailed. Sort of gives new meaning to childhood scraps with my sister – clearly on a deeply darkly level, I actually wanted her dead!

Some more examples of manipulative or disingenuous behaviour in the planet's life-forms:

Squirrels, having accumulated a tasty pile of nuts for the winter, will deliberately forage far from their larder in order to divert attention from its location. The closer their muckers get to the secret stash, the more frenzied the owner's apparent interest in a nut-less piece of undergrowth. The tropical waters off Panama are host to tiny crustaceans called mantis shrimps and they make their homes in rock and reef cavities. Not having an RDP scheme to provide for the homeless down there, house-owning shrimps have to defend their chalets from frequent attack and attempted takeovers. So they place themselves at the mouth of their caves and puff out every appendage they own in order to look large and menacing. But at times when the shrimps moult, these appendages are soft and pliable – and of as little use to them as a South African identity document in the face of a rampaging xenophobic mob. They know this. They know it's all a bluff - and they also know that he who bluffs best, wins.

Much closer to home, I have anecdotal evidence of dog duplicity. One of my beloved canines, Mpho, has a habit of sneaking out of the bedroom during the night to snack on cat food. But near the door there's a floorboard that creaks loudly when she steps onto it. The sound wakes me without fail and I put an end to her midnight feast with a gruff "You're busted, kid, back to bed!" Very recently, however, it occurred to me that the cat biscuits were still being subjected to nocturnal raids but that I was sleeping soundly through them. And then, quite by chance, I saw my little girl niftily side-stepping the give-away floorboard. Now that's clever. That's a mighty clever association between cause and effect, and that it's motivated by self-interest (or greed) takes nothing away from its admirability.

I can hear the animal behaviourists baying for my blood by now (well stand in line, guys, there are plenty more out there!) Of *course* the mantis shrimps don't 'know' all this in a conscious sense. And of course the little birdies, squirrelkies, springbökkies and Mphokies don't 'lie' in the sense that they view what they are doing as transgressions of a moral code. But they are deliberately deceiving the creatures around them in the genetically hard-wired, tried-and-tested 'knowledge' that this is the ticket to more food, better shelter, the best babe and a higher position in the social hierarchy. What blows my mind is that even the most basic of organisms, such as mantis shrimps, can predict (or at least wager on) an outcome based on a set of

actions. For my money, that's an appreciation of consequence, an unmistakable sign of intelligence – however simple in origin or execution. It's one of the many reasons why I don't eat shrimps, or fish, or animals, or birds – even if they are a bunch of lying thugs!

It's also the reason why I should quit bleating about the bipedal liars in my life, when they are simply representative of a whole planet-full of Pinochios. And ultimately, as a comparatively successful member of a dog-cheat-dog society, I must ask myself how I have managed to get this far. Could it be that it's because of the odd... um ... fib?!