

25 April 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Neanderthals get a bad rap. We look down our noses at our extinct cousins. We've always assumed they were big and strong but dumb and clumsy. Not like us!

We use our clever brains to make life better. *Their* brains were primitive. *We* have iPhones and electric can openers. *They* grunted and hit things with rocks. *We're* still here. *They* aren't.

A Neanderthal is the kind of cousin you'd call on for help when you have to move a hefty piece of furniture. But you wouldn't ask him to do your taxes or recommend an author.

We may need to revise this prejudice, though. It turns out that many of us carry some Neanderthal genes. (Do friends ask *you* for help when they move?) Were Neanderthals more like us than we've wanted to believe?

Archaeologists have uncovered evidence that they buried their dead and strew the graves with flowers in rituals of mourning. Their cultural life was more sophisticated than we'd imagined.

While exploring a cave some years ago, an archeologist came upon a primitive-looking flute made from the thigh bone of a bear. There's reason to believe it was made tens of thousands of years ago by a Neanderthal musician. An instrument maker fashioned a modern replica and played it. It made sounds on a scale we'd recognise today.

I want all of this to be true.

I want to believe that what we've come to call 'culture' is not just the pretty wallpaper we paste over the biological business called 'survival'. I want to believe the building blocks of culture – games, songs, stories, and dances, for example – are as deeply inscribed in our genetic code as our need for food and sleep, and just as important for our thriving, too.

The discovery of this Neanderthal flute feeds my belief. But forces pull in the opposite direction. They're not *all* wrong.

Maslow's Pyramid Scheme

"Do your homework, *then* you can play baseball. Dry the dishes, *then* you can sing and dance. Finish your chores, *then* you can paint."

Many parents sigh loudly, furrow their brows, and lecture their lazy children with these very words. "Because I said so," they add. Maybe they didn't know they had an esteemed psychologist, Abraham Maslow, to back them up.

Maslow ranked human needs in a pyramid. At the bottom he put biological survival, our need for food, water, air, and shelter. *These come first.* They're the first order of business for any immigrant to a new country, aren't they?

Once we've secured *them*, we can begin to indulge a 'higher' need on the pyramid. We need to learn the technical language of a new vocation, master a skill, fit into a group, become trustworthy citizens, and engage in an enterprise larger than ourselves. We need a 'job'.

"Poet is not a job!" shouts the practical parent.

When we've attained this level on the pyramid, Maslow thought, we're in a position to entertain the needs he placed at the highest level. These are 'curiosity' and 'creativity'; not just curiosity about the world of nature all around us, but curiosity about our own potential to create a *human* world, a 'culture' we can inhabit with others.

This is the making and singing of songs, the telling of stories, dancing, playing, and communal celebration. The higher we go, he thought, the more we can make our innate potentials 'actual'. But how will we make the highest level 'actual' unless we've first mastered the lower ones?

This is why parents insist, "Do your homework first, then you can play." And it's why we tell each other, "Let's pay the rent first, *then* we can pay for theatre tickets." *First things first.*

The danger, I think, is that we'll put in a 'hard day's night', work, work, and then do some more work, 'eight days a week'. We'll be stuck in survival mode and never climb the pyramid.

What then? All too soon, the pyramid's ground floor begins to feel like life's only point and purpose, as if it were our proper, permanent home. The world of 'culture', springing from our need to be curious and creative, begins to feel as if it's not innate at all. Unlike our need for food and sleep, 'culture' feels like expendable fluff.

Then, before you know it, and right under your nose, a business-friendly government closes a few more libraries, cuts back the hours on the remaining ones, and introduces user fees.

When we *do* visit the library, or whatever is now deemed a 'frill', we feel as if we've just been 'playing around'. We weren't *working*, and we feel a bit guilty about it.

If 'starving artists' feel guilty about it, they live with the guilt along with the starving. They've jeopardised their place on the bottom level for the sake of touching the top one. Why? They know this need is innate. They know it's inscribed in our genetic code. They know it's not a frill.

The hippy whose name is 'Jesus' may have been in their camp. "Do not worry about your life," he said, "what you will eat, or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

But parents never say *that* to their children, do they? (Unless it's the wildness of the clothing that worries them.)

Maybe Neanderthals knew better than we do.

Let's assume the average North American needs to work forty hours every week to earn enough money to secure the food and shelter we need in our outrageously expensive economy. This secures our place on the pyramid's bottom level. Barely.

We're free to spend the balance of the time in recreation, rest, and the routine maintenance of life – getting the car repaired, going to the dentist, shopping for food and clothing, and so on. Perhaps there's a bit left over for hobbies and games. Or maybe we're too zonked for that.

But an anthropological study has conjectured that in primitive 'stone age' cultures, it required only seventeen hours per week, not forty, to secure adequate food and shelter. The rest of the time was 'free time', an oceanic oasis in which to sing songs, play games, tell stories, and make a flute from the bones of a bear – to dwell at the top of the pyramid, in other words.

Looked at through Neanderthal eyes, Maslow's pyramid *confirms* what I want to believe. Our cultural life is not a frivolous 'add-on' to the true business of living. Living is more than bare 'survival'. Our 'biology' pushes us, inexorably, to climb that big pyramid.

Reading by Firelight

My life passed through a Neanderthal phase. I was a penniless student with just a year of study in forestry under my belt. But it was enough for me to get a summer job with a pulp and paper company. With two other students

roughly my age, I carried out a forest inventory in a remote area in the far north of Ontario.

We were well beyond the roads and railways. We moved about by canoe for weeks at a time, clearing a new place to camp on most nights. Our life together was primitive and physical. In fact, it was 'beastly uncomfortable'. But it was fun beyond measure.

We had no telephone, radio, or television; no cinema, saloon, or concert hall to go to. Just nature's harsh splendour, sunrise, sunset, the stars, and the northern lights. Also, swarms of black flies and deer flies like *you would not believe*; and moose, beaver, an occasional black bear, porcupines, and otter. I saw bird life as I'll never see it again. Fish were plentiful and good.

No electricity, no plumbing, no roof over our heads; no chair to sit down on or counter to cook upon; no laundromat, no grocery shop, no liquor store; no post office, hospital, or bank.

We had a canoe, a tent, sleeping bags, some dry and tinned food, an axe, pocket knives, fishing rods, and cooking and work equipment. Also, some tobacco.

This was as close to 'nature' as I will ever live until the looming Dark Age finally descends. Civilisation's cover, consolation, and comfort had been stripped away from us. We lived on the bottom step of the bottom level of the pyramid.

And yet – here's the point – something strong and spontaneous erupted in us that summer. Looking back, I can honestly say that it was a strong, innate impulse springing from the tap root of our human nature. A *need* asserted itself.

Not that need. It's not what you're thinking. At least, it's not *just* what you're thinking. We didn't 'go rogue', either. We didn't fall *below* Maslow's bottom level. Nor did we devolve into violent, feral savages. Not quite.

Well, in *some* ways we did, maybe. For one thing, you'd say our language degraded terribly, if you were to measure our language from a 'civilised' angle. Seen another way, though, our ingenuity at insult, our talent for teasing, and our proficiency at profanity took a more clever and colourful turn as time went on. But that's not my point here.

Though we were living close to nature, on the pyramid's ground floor, we still needed 'culture'. *That's* the point. We longed for the pyramid's higher levels more than we longed for a proper flush toilet. Or maybe those longings were equal.

There was a tiny Public Library housed in a tiny trailer in the tiny town where our big pulp and paper company based its operations. On our first return to that town, after showering, shaving, using a flush toilet, running up a tab at the bar, and replenishing our tobacco supply, we hastily checked out some books and packed them for our return to the bush.

Each night in the gathering dark, as the fire gradually became our chief source of light, we took turns reading aloud to each other. We read Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*, Stephen King's *The Dead Zone*, the *Book of Revelation* from my pocket Bible (it scared us more than Stephen King did), *Oliver Twist*, and something by Stephen Leacock, I think.

If you'd seen us swatting flies, eagerly taking turns reading aloud, you'd never have believed your eyes. I don't think we'd have believed this about ourselves, either, had we been able to see ourselves as others see us. Only looking back do I see it.

I ask you, in what quarter of the world we now inhabit would you see three boisterous boys, dawdling on the cusp of their delayed manhood, so fervently looking forward to reading a book aloud to each other, every night, after supper and a smoke, all the while believing it to be the best reward of their exhausting day? When do any of us read aloud to anyone anymore?

Perhaps I carried a Neanderthal gene into the bush that summer long ago. Perhaps it expressed itself there. Perhaps Neanderthals were truly the cultured ones.

Just for fun, I've attached a few photos from that summer so you can get a glimpse of what I'm talking about. Also, the worship service which, I know, you will read certainly aloud, right?

Yours in the faith,
Andrew



