

Why Do We Do What We Do?

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A Lesson from A Mixed Up Cat

Janet has a house cat now. In all the 22 years that we've been married, this is a first for us. We've almost always had cats, but never a cat in the house. This cat is different.

Janet really likes tortoiseshell cats. Ever since she had one back when she was little, tortoiseshell cats have been special to her. Awhile back, she saw a long-haired tortoiseshell kitten advertised in the paper. We drove to LaCygne, Kansas to bring the kitten home.

This kitten started life as a normal, outdoor cat, living in a barn with her mother and siblings, until one day the side of her little kitten face swelled up in an alarming way. She had a parasitic fly larva. The maggot had burrowed under her skin and was growing there while eating her flesh.

After squeezing the larva out and cleaning the wound, they brought the kitten into the house and fed her canned cat food. Once she was nursed back to health, they gave her to Janet. Within the next few days, we determined the kitten would not eat with the other cats, and she would not eat dry cat food. That's the story of how Janet's tortoiseshell cat became our first house cat.

Emmy, (That's what Janet named her cat.) spends her nights outdoors, but every morning she comes in to eat a can of cat food in the kitchen. Of course, she never completely finishes a can of food in one sitting. When she has eaten what she wants, she conducts a curious little ceremony. Taking long strokes with her paw, she scratches the linoleum floor all around her food dish. It's as if she is covering her food, burying her leftovers in a layer of invisible leaves.

As a young kitten, Emmy must have watched her mother do the same thing. Maybe she killed a rabbit or a big rat and after she and her kittens ate their fill, she covered what was left with leaves, hay or straw, whatever was lying nearby. Emmy watched and learned the action but without understanding the purpose.

Problems with Guineas

The first year we came to the little western Missouri farm on which we live, we couldn't raise a garden. We tried, but the grasshoppers ate everything. Then an older lady, a friend of ours named Evelyn Patterson, came to our house one day and said, "I want to take you somewhere; get in your car and follow me." She took us to a place where some people had Guineas for sale. In case you don't know what Guineas are, they are birds of the pheasant family but with short tails and gray feathers covered with thousands of white dots. They are, without a doubt, the noisiest variety of poultry anyone has ever

endeavored to raise, but they love to eat grasshoppers. Evelyn Patterson bought us 17 Guineas that day, and within a few short weeks our grasshopper problem was over. We were also getting fewer tick bites, as the Guineas were eating those little blood-suckers as well. The marvelous thing is, these Guineas didn't bother any of our vegetables. They walked through the garden every morning, picking bugs, but never bothered any of the plants.

The only problem with this first group of Guineas was that most of them were males or roosters. Out of 17 birds, there were only a couple of hens. The roosters chased these poor hens around so much that they could hardly slow down long enough to lay an egg, much less raise a family. The roosters also chased each other. It sort of reminded me of that TV show called *Survivor*. Somehow all the Guinea roosters decided on which one of their number was the weakest; then they took turns chasing and pecking that one Guinea until he died. After that, they got together to decide on the next rooster Guinea to be "voted off." Finally, we got down to just a couple of Guinea roosters to go with the Guinea hens, and, lo and behold, one of the hens hatched out about a dozen Guinea keets. That's what baby Guineas are called – keets. Would you believe almost all those baby Guineas turned out to be roosters?

This pattern persisted until the day came when we had to buy more Guineas. We brought the new flock home expecting them to, at least, act no worse than our old flock. But when the onions sprouted that spring, these new Guineas walked up and down the onion rows, picking the green stems. Just before the peas were ready to pick, these new Guineas picked them and ate them. When the corn sprouted, these new Guineas were out there pulling it up! Now, the new Guineas did all the bad things the old Guineas had done too, chasing each other and all that, but at least the old Guineas had never touched the garden crops. Why did the new Guineas act differently? The answer may come as something of a surprise. The new Guineas were raised by chickens.

It's not so bad when chickens pick at the plants in the garden. It's expected of chickens that they will do that, so we keep the chickens fenced away from the garden during the spring and summer. Chickens produce eggs and meat; that's their purpose. The primary purpose of Guineas is to eat bugs. Oh, they are good to eat too, tasting just like pheasant, and we've learned the knack of killing the excess roosters for food. Even so, we have Guineas on the place to eat bugs. They have to run loose to do that. It's not good for a Guinea to act like a chicken.

Every Nation, Tribe, People and Language

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried in a loud voice:

**“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”**

- Revelation 7:9-10

Cultures are what we are talking about here. A cat has a culture. Even a barnyard bird has a culture. Human beings have cultures.

What we read there in the biblical book of Revelation is from a record of a vision that was given to a man named John, a Jewish follower of Jesus a long time ago. When Creator gives a vision, it's given in images that a person can understand; it's given within that person's culture. So, of course a Cherokee will have a different vision than a Lakota. A Swede will have a different vision than a Jew. The white robes, palm branches, lamb and throne are images that all have great meaning within the Jewish culture. But when we get beyond these culturally specific images from John's vision, we see something else. We see a diversity of cultures. More than that, we see cultural diversity as Creator's ideal for creation. We see not *one* nation, tribe, people and language but *every* nation, tribe, people and language encircling the seat of Creator. We hear no mention of the Jewish God or even of the Christian God. Rather, all these people of every culture are saying salvation (health, peace, wholeness, balance) belongs to *our* God. We see that when all people center on Creator, rather than on this or that exclusive notion *about* Creator, there truly is health, peace, wholeness and balance. We see also that Creator truly loves creation, in all its rich and wonderful God-given variety.

Our cultures are our ways of life, how we have been taught to do things. Our cultures are what make us unique as peoples, giving us our identities. But sometimes cultures can get messed up.

What about that tortoiseshell cat? She does something every day with no idea why she does it. It's the same with many human beings.

Sometimes I encounter European-American Christians who say they have *no* culture. I've heard people say things like, “Our identity is in Christ. We don't have a culture. All we have is the Bible. All we need is Jesus.” If I can demonstrate to people that, indeed they do have a culture – a culture that is *not*, in fact, biblically based, they may begin to understand just how important cultures are to everyone.

Consider European-American wedding traditions. Why are there bride's maids? Why does the bride wear a veil? Why does the preacher ask, “Who giveth this woman....”? Why do guests throw rice or bird seed? As for the purpose of bride's maids, in the old days European people understood that every bride has rivals, those who have longed for her young man as their own husband. These rivals come to the wedding with an envious or evil eye, and in their envy they cast curses on the bride as she comes down the aisle. For this reason, decoys are sent in ahead of the bride. The curses of the evil eye will bounce harmlessly off these decoys or bride's maids, because, after all, it's not *their*

wedding day. As for the veil, just as every bride has her rivals so does every groom. When these rivals see the bride on her wedding day, their blood will rise to the point where they may be inclined to fight. Therefore, the bride's face is covered until the end of the ceremony. As for the giving of the bride, that's pretty simple. Time was, not so long ago, when a European or European-American woman was always considered to be the property of a man. She began life as the property of her father and later became the property of her husband, to love, honor and obey. And pomegranate seeds were thrown. Because pomegranates contain so many tiny black seeds, they are considered a talisman of fertility. Throwing pomegranate seeds ensures the bride and groom will have many children. Later, for convenience sake, it was changed to rice. Still later, after circulation of the unfounded rumors that eating rice may cause a bird's gizzard to explode; rice was replaced with bird seed.

Then there are Christmas and Easter, two "Christian" holidays, whose traditions lie in the pre-Christian cultures of the Mediterranean region and Western Europe.

Just as with Emmy the cat, many human beings do not know why they do what they do. They just do it. I'm not saying these ways are bad, but only that people need to understand the purposes. Otherwise, it amounts only to empty ritual, like a cat scratching on the kitchen floor.

It's the same with many Indians. Take feathers for instance. How many Indian people wear feathers without understanding why? Or what if we take part in ancient ceremonies that have to do with raising corn, but we don't raise corn, not even a little row of corn in the garden? Learn your culture and live your culture and not just on an occasional weekend. Know why you do what you do, and then do it with all your heart.

And consider those Guineas. All of us Indian people are colonized and just about as culturally mixed up as those Guineas are. There has always been cultural borrowing from one people to another, but some things just don't go together. Be careful about mixing the ways. Look for how indigenous ways have been replaced with foreign ways in your own life and how these ways can cause inner turmoil and outward strife. We have to make peace inside ourselves. Some of that means allowing Creator to change the colonized behaviors and bring us back to the indigenous path. All living cultures change, adapt and grow, but cultural changes need to make sense. There also remains a need for diversity and distinction between cultures. It's not right for Guineas to act like chickens. Is it right for Indians to behave just like white folks?

An old Hebrew proverb says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

Jesus is quoted as saying, "...my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Some imagine that Jesus is talking about ox yokes here. However, the type of yoke to which Jesus is most likely referring is the wooden yoke which human beings sometimes wear across their shoulders so they may carry two buckets of water or mortar or bricks or whatever else they need to carry as a balanced load. The Greek word "chrestos,"

translated as “easy” in Matthew 11:30 may also be translated as “well-fitting.” There is an old tradition that, as a carpenter, Jesus specialized in making yokes that were especially well-fitting. The thing is, there are many people today who are walking around under yokes that do not fit well, lives out of balance, burdened and chafed by jobs, lifestyles, philosophies and religious ideas and practices that do not fit who they are. It’s Creator’s plan that everything will fit well in our lives. I wonder.... Do you think those onion tops give the Guineas indigestion or heartburn? Maybe the Guineas go through the garden picking greens and thinking to themselves, “The chickens taught us to do this, but it sure doesn’t feel right.