

WHAT WE DID ON OUR SUMMER VACATION

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TOM:

We were anchored in Gary's Creek, off the Little Choptank River, on Maryland's Eastern Shore around the first of July. Now, Gary's Creek is about two miles long and very isolated. With the binoculars we could count sixteen sailboats anchored in a cluster three miles away, down the Little Choptank, undoubtedly a sociable group—a sociable celebration of Independence, freedom, man's inalienable rights, and the pursuit of happiness, if they chose to contemplate at all during their long Fourth of July holiday weekend.

However, it was Sunday morning, about 10:30, with nothing but the woods, marshes, swans, and a single, small waterman's home within a mile of us—a hard-won site through a long unmarked channel at high tide with less than a foot of water at times under our keel. And, Sunday morning, 10:30, absent from our UUFR friends was a good time for contemplation. Contemplation and celebration. Celebration and amazement. Amazement at life.

This is not another "God Tracks" talk. There will be no attempt to explain the wonders that surround us. Let's just for the moment wallow in those wonders—unexplained. Unanalyzed as to their source. Share the amazement as a celebration of life.

Two white swans glide back and forth along the adjacent shore, brilliantly bright in the morning sun. Occasionally, their long necks disappear beneath the surface grazing on whatever swan's find appealing on the muddy bottom. Yesterday, they paraded their little ones along that same shore, possibly forgetting they were not as alone as is their norm. They may have been a bit embarrassed at the thought of showing those ugly children to outsiders much before their shape and whiteness had developed to match our image associated with the word "swan". For, this morning, only image conscious swans are visible, either nearby or afar. Are the swans here to join our celebration of life? Or are they just another reason for it? They are amazing creatures.

At the north extremity of Gary's Creek, where only the dinghy with the motor tipped for shallow water can go, someone built a windmill. Now, discard your vision of a little carved duck on a stick with its wings beating in circles. Throw out the six-foot miniature steel derricks you can buy at Southern States or Joe Curry's place. No, and I'm not talking about what we see driving across the Texas plains watering cattle, or abandoned behind Don Edmond's place at Brown's Store corner. This is an honest-to-goodness full-size windmill like one might find in the Low Countries of Europe or on the English coast. It is a post mill in that the entire house, if you would, revolves around a humongous post upon which the whole contraption sits. The house enclosed the millstones that ground the grain. Next to a flight of stairs to climb up to the house, a beam the size and length of

a telephone pole angles out from the base of the house with its end on a three-foot wheel on the ground. By pushing this pole around, one way or another, the house and blades revolve to point into the wind for power or perpendicular to the wind to feather the blades so their sails can be furled for bad weather. This whole contraption reaches about forty feet into the sky, roughly the size of a four-story building—here among the woods and marshes of Gary's Creek.

Amazing to find such a structure here, in good repair and looking fully functional and well-maintained, merely to make a product that can be bought for a dollar or so at the nearest grocery. Doubly amazing that some descendant of Homo Erectus on this site somehow obtained the knowledge developed over the last two thousand year period on how to build such a device that is strong enough to survive storms, light enough to perform its function, and yet durable enough to make the whole effort worthwhile.

Triply amazing that this descendant of Homo Erectus was able to collect the timbers and planks, hardwood and softwood, and cut them, shape them, and assemble them to bring this windmill to be. His legs were not adequate to move all the materials to the construction site so he employed complex machines to do that job. His back was inadequate for lifting the various members into place, so he employed simple machines of ramps, scaffold, levers, and pulleys to accomplish that feat. His arms were inadequate to fit, shape, and attach the components so she employed hammers, drills, bolts, and nails to make the structure sound. His hands were inadequate ---

Now here is where we must draw the line! Let's grant the descendant of Homo Erectus his ingenuity and be amazed at and celebrate the accomplishment in overcoming the limitations of his legs, back and arms. For these things truly are a few steps up the amazing ladder compared to the ability of the beautiful swan.

Note that I stopped this inadequate stuff when I got to hands. Smithsonian magazine subscribers may have a hint of what's coming. For, if you are truly inclined to celebrate life, wallow in amazement at its beauties and intricacies, your ever-present hands can serve both as a reminder and focus of that worship.

Sounds like I'm Tommy Harishna founding a new hand-worshipping cult, doesn't it? Well, let me try to make followers out of you. Short of that, you may at least be left yet another reason to celebrate the world around you, including the fascinating biological machine at the ends of your arms.

Each hand is comprised of about twenty bone segments, joints that allow twenty degrees of movement, twenty forearm muscles controlling the hand, and twenty muscles in the hand itself, and about twenty nerve types. And the nerves from the hand go all the way to the brain. Some say the hand ends at the brain. Again, an amazingly complex and versatile gadget.

Neurologist Frank Wilson of the University of California Medical School summarizes current thinking on the hand's evolution. Don't be distracted now—this is not the back

door into “God Tracks”—only an emphasis on the uniqueness of our human hands. According to Wilson, the hand took a step forward about sixty million years ago when squirrel-size primates took to living in trees and made appropriate physical alterations. For one thing, their paws changed—the thumb, although not yet opposable, became more mobile, the better to grip the branches. Also, to make feeding easier, nails replaced claws. The palms developed sensitive skin ridges. The hand began working hand in hand with the brain, so to speak.

By about ten million years ago, our tree-living ancestors had “learned” that making one’s way across the top of a branch is a precarious transportation method. Better to hang from a branch and swing below it. But swinging required a loosening of the attachment between the wrist and the major forearm bone, the ulna, to allow extra arm twist and wrist tilt. By about five million years ago, when the hominoids got going, the use of the hand assumed an ever more primary importance. The Australopithecine “Lucy” could join her thumb, index finger, and middle finger to form a three-finger grip—the basics to pitch a baseball, or more likely, a rock. Lucy could also pound a rock to crack nuts with that new, flexible wrist—its looseness absorbing the shock.

Next came the ability for the ring finger and the pinkie to oppose the thumb and, voila!, we could grasp, swing, and control a baseball bat—I mean a club. Another advantage of the modifications for stone pitching and club swinging was the ability to manipulate small objects with just the fingers without clinching them to their palms. Now they could go into the tool making business. This macro-mechanical stuff in various forms is old hat to most of us. We pretty much recognize the anatomical challenge of teaching any other creatures that share our earth to play Brahm’s Lullaby on a violin, daintily thread a needle, or untangle a string of Christmas tree lights. But that flexible mechanism of bones, joints, muscles, and tendons is only the beginning.

Did you know that there are thousands of nerve receptors of all kinds at your fingertips? Some of the nerve receptors are for touch, but not all touch receptors are the same. Some receptors sense the force upon your skin, others sense hot, still others sense cold, and others are for itch. There are receptors that sense mechanical pain, others that sense thermal pain, and still others that sense chemical pain. Some receptors sense the stretch of your skin. That’s how you know the position of your hand and fingers without looking.

Your fingers are amazingly sensitive. There are touch receptors perpendicular to your skin and more that are parallel to your skin reading through the ridges of your fingerprints. Those fingerprint ridges are duplicated on the inside surface of the skin to further amplify the sensitivity of touch. Research has shown that one can detect a single dot on a glass plate that is just three microns high—that is 3/100’s the diameter of a human hair. Further, we can detect roughness just 75 nanometers high, and a nanometer is only a thousandth of a micron. Using a fingernail, you can detect things even smaller. What a truly amazing mechanism.

Let's consider fingerprints further. Beyond augmenting the sense of touch, fingerprint ridges may also enhance grip—homegrown non-skid—even though the ridges actually decrease the area of surface contact. But there are a lot of sweat glands in the fingertips, perhaps more than any other part of the body. Our skin, when we grip something, may act like a sponge on glass. When the sponge is moist, there's more friction and a better grip. An electron microscope photograph of the fingertip's ridges show each ridge is dotted with white specks, each a tiny sweat gland. Fingertip ridges may be for holding this moisture.

If you are not thoroughly amazed by what is attached at the end of your arms and wired directly to that thing kept always in the dark, your brain, consider the fact of what you can see with your hands. Handling an unfamiliar item in the dark will shortly tell you its shape, heft, texture, temperature, and many other characteristics that might quickly lead to a mental image and identification. Or, a mechanical failure on this boat, always in the most inaccessible place, may have to be fixed this evening, completely unseen, except for hand vision. Indian Engineer Mandayam Srinivasan of the Touch Lab at MIT reports of interviews with people, blind and deaf from toddlerhood, who see and hear by putting their hands on a person's face and throat. One such person, who could neither hear nor see, "listened" using his hands to Srinivasan, whose intonations only hint of his native Bangalore. With one hand on Srinivasan's cheek, the other on his throat, the blind and deaf man asked, "Are you Indian?"

Who could not look at one's hands and be truly amazed at what they can do? Even the most butter-fingered individual with two left thumbs has got to be amazed at what his hands can do. Our language reflects this focus from the right hand of God down to the boss's right hand man. If you've got to hand it to him, one way is to give him a big hand. A bird in the hand may result from first-hand information. We may go cap in hand, hand in hand, or climb a rope hand over hand. We work together hand in glove, sometimes trying to get the upper hand, or, at least, a free hand, to do our business avoiding the threat of having to live hand to mouth. Sometimes we may act a bit high-handed. Occasionally we win hands down. If we are dealt a bad hand, maybe our only option is to wash our hands of it.

Have you ever heard anyone say, "I just don't like my hands?" In my experience, that statement was always tied to issues of vanity. How could anyone not like his or her hands? Such amazing and magical mechanisms. They can warn you of hot before you're burnt, find your favorite pen at the bottom of the jumble that is your purse, speak to the deaf without uttering a sound, and undo a bra strap in the blink of an eye in the back of a '55 Chevy—with enough practice. Now, how could anyone, anyone, not marvel at their hands. For the truly vain, maybe two small swans at the end of their arms would help.

Everyday cannot be spent at anchor, up the intricate channel to Gary's Creek in the company of swans and their hidden cygnets in unabashed celebration of life. But there is something even more amazing and always close at hand.

I, and hopefully you, in the absence of swans will look frequently at your hands in a different light and that glance will case you to reflect, to contemplate, and to celebrate the many truly amazing aspects of life.

SHIRLEY:

I, too, sat on our boat in the Choptank and in the Wye Rivers. Tom sat on that boat, amazed and overwhelmed with the beauty and the complexity of life.

I, on the other hand, sat on that boat, waiting for my friends from outer space to show up.

I had lots of time to wait—they're never on time. And so, I brought out my pack of Post-It notes. I figured I'd continue doing my research for my friends from outer space. You remember—to help them in their search for signs of intelligent life in the universe. They LOVE my post-its.

The reason I knew my friends would be coming soon was because we had so many lightning storms while we sat on the Wye River. Every day one really fierce one—sometimes more. My friends from outer space are fascinated by lightning. They don't have it where they come from. Maybe that's why they don't get goosebumps.

They asked me once if lightning and thunder gave earthlings the sense of God reaching out to touch them. I told them no. Maybe a long time ago. Nowadays God pretty much keeps to himself, probably surfs the net a lot. Probably God is looking for signs of intelligent life on the internet, they said.

I asked them, “Do you have God out there in space where you come from?”

They said yes, but not the same as ours. I asked them to tell me about their God. This is where things got a little confusing. One of my friends said God was a tiny particle—the simplest most basic particle there was and all things came from that tiny particle.

But then another alien laughed and said, “No, no, that's not it. God is water. That's why all living things must have water to live. And when creatures drink, they bring a bit of God inside themselves.”

But then another alien told me God wasn't either a tiny particle or water but was the force that lived in the center of their planet, giving them energy and strength.

Well, as you can probably figure out, these guys didn't have a CLUE about God, anymore than we do. But I didn't tell them that. Like I said last time you and I talked, I figure God has a good case of Alzheimer's and has pretty much forgot about all of us. So, I guess it's not all that important to God WHAT we think of him.

You don't hear much about God's talking to us anymore. He used to write a lot, I guess. His first book was called the Old Testament. That was mostly a bunch of short stories, a few poems. It was a fairly popular book, I guess. The biggest criticism of it, though, was that God hadn't really developed the characters enough. It was hard to really get inside a character and figure out why he did things. I mean, Job—such a whiner, but why? And Abraham—trying to kill his child. Go figure!

So, not much character development. Lots of action—can you believe that flood thing?

So, then God wrote a sequel, the New Testament. Much better. The whole book pretty much centered around one character.

My alien friends asked me once. They said, “Why do so many earthlings go sailing? Is it so they can sit out on the water to watch the lightning?” I told them most people go sailing to live a more simple life. In a sailboat, you don’t worry about mowing the lawn, or impressing your boss, or wearing the right clothes.

They thought about that awhile, and then they said, “If earthlings are happier being where they don’t have to worry about mowing the lawn or impressing their boss or wearing the right clothes, then why don’t they just stay on land and live in a more simple style like they do at sea?”

It was going to explain it to them, but my cell phone in my purse rang, and I had to answer it. It might have been my boss.

I made a note on a post-it about something I saw on our sailing trip. This kinda relates to the Abraham story I just mentioned. I knew this story would interest my friends from outer space. But I decided not to show it to them just yet. I’m afraid they’ll ask me questions that I don’t know how to answer. I need to think about it myself first. But I’ll tell you and maybe you can help.

One Sunday, Tom and I were sitting on the boat, anchored in the middle of a wide bay on the Wye River. The Coast Guard had predicted severe thunder storms with strong lightning, possible hail, winds up to 45 miles per hour. And it looked like the storm was very very close.

The sky was black—it was two in the afternoon so black was not the color we’d hoped the sky would be. In the distance, lightning—cloud to ground—was flashing every few minutes. The wind had picked up so there were whitecaps on the choppy water.

Then, around the point of land that separated the bay from the river, came a small power boat—really moving along. And behind the boat—now THIS is the really weird part—behind the boat was trailing an inner tube. It was banging along behind the little boat, plowing through the water or pounding up and down on the white caps. And, believe it or not, holding on to the inner tube was a young kid, maybe 11-12 years old. Picture it—dark menacing clouds overhead, choppy seas below, and lightning connecting the two. And a kid being towed through it all.

What were they thinking?

I can just hear my friends asking me about THAT! “Is this some sort of earthling punishment system?” “Perhaps a modern version of keel hauling?” “Is it a religious sacrifice?” (It WAS Sunday, you know.)

Frankly, I don’t know what to think. I like the religious sacrifice answer the best.

What I’m really afraid of, just between you and me, is that if I tell my friends about this story, they’ll just stop searching on earth of signs of any intelligence at all. And I’d miss them.