



The Survival of the Fittest

Why is the human story really a story about communities?

BY JIM CAMPBELL

On the main road, our tour coach crossed a bridge spanning an incredibly deep ravine near Sorrento. The Romans built it 2,000 years ago. After crossing the bridge, I wondered how many people it took to cut and move all that stone, and how the Roman engineers organized it all.

But it is more than that. The very existence of that bridge is a serious challenge to people who are always saying things like: "It's a dog-eat-dog world out there," "It's a rat race," "It's the survival of the fittest."

The phrase "the survival of the fittest" comes from Charles Darwin's work on the origin of the species. It sums up his theory about how the creatures who adapt best survive, and those who don't adapt, don't survive. It is a useful concept for it helps

us to understand our environment.

However, Darwin's insights have little to do with people, or with our survival, success or failure. The human race opted out of biological determinism long, long ago.

It happened when our distant ancestors saw that if they worked together, they would all benefit. One could keep watch at night, while others slept. They could build better shelters and get more to eat when they worked and hunted together.

The determining characteristic of humanity is not our biology, but our community.

Creating communities, sharing our skills and knowledge, and combining our collective energy ranks right up there with the invention of language and the discovery of fire as a huge leap forward for humanity.

Illustration by Gerald Heydens

It may even top the list.

The invention of the community was a master step that broke our biological bonds. Working together freed us. It meant we could build bridges, dig canals, build boats and create all sorts of things.

It has taken a lot of work but we have managed pretty well. We invented councils, governments and constitutions to help us to live together and serve the common good. We devised courts to settle disputes without violence. We put together schools to pass on knowledge and skills. We have striven hard to work things out so people can do what they do best – like making flint arrowheads or designing nuclear reactors. We have created thousands of structures to organize ways to work, share and help each other.

The human story is not about biological determinism – the survival of the fittest, a dog-eat-dog existence. To live on the level of the survival of the fittest means we have failed to be human. The human story is really a story about communities.

However, it is not easy getting community business done in a society where individual rights have a high profile and priority. Our names are not posted on lists telling us of our regular turn on night watch or when to help dig the community well. It is not easy in a money economy to be sure where we fit in, to know if what we do matters.

And so, while a lot of us grumble about how things are run, we prefer to act on the



Jim Campbell

assumption that things will roll along without us getting involved. It seems to be working. We happen to live in the country the UN says is the best in the world. And yet we who live here know we have problems. Maybe all the UN is telling us is that others are worse off.

It's hard to be complacent when there are so many things that need improvement, so many problems to be worked out, agendas that are out of kilter and people who are misused or excluded. Can things ever work perfectly when they're run by imperfect people?

Being complacent can be very dangerous. The very ancestors who invented communities learned the hard way that leaving the running of the community to "them" could lead to disaster. Things could easily get out of hand. Often the structures and the people that were meant to serve, instead delivered suffering, enslavement and chaos.

The community needs us. It is our business. It is our business to make sure we never fall into the mode of "the survival of the fittest." It's the business of each of us to shoulder the burdens of building and running our community. The work begun by our ancestors never ends. It is the work that makes us part of humanity. 🍁

■ *Jim Campbell is an Oakville writer. He will respond to comments sent by post to the Home Digest editorial office or to e-mail sent to homedigest@canada.com.*

DID YOU HEAR...?

- If you ate just 500 calories less each day, you would lose a pound a week.
- Red and white were approved as the official colours of Canada – not when our current flag was introduced in 1965 – but by King George V back in 1921.
- Human bone is four times as strong as concrete.

