

Thoughts on the Season of Lent

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As we approach the season of Lent, I approach it as an evolutionary biologist rather than a true believer. Belief in a creator must have some sort of evolutionary underpinnings, as many cultures not only have a god, but also accessory deities (such as Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed and other leaders of modern day and/or ancient religious beliefs). Just as physical adaptations in all living things must provide some sort of advantage to them, so must behavioral actions. In the long run, creatures lacking features that adapt them to their environment are less successful than those that have functional adaptations. Unless those organisms come to have more effective adaptations, they go extinct.

Organisms that are narrowly physically and behaviorally adapted to their environments do well over the short period of time, but what happens if that environment changes. Unless there is genetic diversity amongst that population of creatures, it is likely that their over-adaptation to that particular environment foretells their imminent extinction. Thus, all though specific adaptation to one's environment is important over the short haul, genetic diversity over the long haul is just as, if not more important.

How do these biologic principles apply to human existence and what Lenten lesson do they provide for us? Various societies have been extremely successful in the past. If one has visited the American southwest and viewed the cliff dwellings and other artifacts located throughout those states, one comes away with sense of amazement with respect to the folks to who built and lived in those dwellings. How come no one is living in them now? Apparently, those societies were adapted to a particular climatic regime and when those conditions changed their livelihood was impacted and those dwelling locations were no longer viable. If they were to survive as a society, they had to move and adapt to the new conditions.

What does this say of our modern situation? If we as a nation want to last as a society, then we must not only stress adaptability in our society (i.e., a willingness to accept different modes of human sexuality, different modes of religious beliefs, different modes of work), but also work towards diversity not only in our societal environment, but also in our ecological environment. A world that is only white and evangelical will not survive. A world where 1% own all the resources will not survive. A world where the well-to-do inhabitants live in locked enclaves will not survive. A world in which hundreds of species go extinct every year will not survive. A world in which we ravage our environment rather than apply stewardship to it, will not survive. We must support societal and ecologic diversity. We must have equality amongst ourselves and the living creatures of the earth. If we support these efforts, then we as humans might have a chance to continue into the next millennium.