

WOMEN, BONOBOES, AND PEACE: HOW WE CAN LEARN TO BE NICE TO ONE ANOTHER

Chimps are from Mars and Bonobos are from Venus.
--Robert M. Sapolsky

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One of the most significant events on the University of Idaho campus is the Borah Symposium, funded by the William Edgar Borah Outlawry of War Foundation, which was set up by Chicago attorney Salmon O. Levinson in 1929.

Idaho's Republican Senator Borah would have been proud to know that ever since 1948 an annual symposium in his name has been held to address "the causes of war and the conditions for establishing a lasting peace."

This year's topic is "Women, War, and Peace." I was on the Borah Committee for four years, and I was chair when we organized the 1989 symposium on "Cocaine and Conflict." In 1984 I made a concerted effort to convince the committee that we should choose the topic women and peace, but I was voted down. I'm especially gratified that this important topic has finally won approval.

When Jane Goodall first told her colleagues that she had witnessed chimpanzee murder, they advised her to not to make this discovery public. As a good scientist, Goodall of course chose otherwise, even though the news undermined the widely held view that only we were the only violent apes.

We now know that we and the chimps have a close relation, the peaceful bonobos, who are now near extinction in the jungles of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Not only are they being threatened by loss of habitat, but, sadly, there is a local belief that bonobo meat gives young men great strength.

Discovered in the early 20th Century, the bonobos were initially mistaken as small chimps, but they are a separate species that most closely resemble *Australopithecus afarensis*, a distant human ancestor. Bonobos are more naturally bipedal, and the males lack both the heavy musculature and aggressive nature of their chimp cousins.

Bonobo society is matriarchal, even though the alpha male bonobo will pretend that he is in charge, sometimes making threatening gestures at intruders, it is the alpha female and her sisters who rule the roost.

While a dominant male chimp can take any female he wants by force, the bonobo male has to court his mate. Bonobo males, as one scientist observed, must "ask first, by displaying themselves in a persuasive but non-aggressive manner, offering food or making other propositions--and bonobo females have the right to refuse."

Bonobos are the most sexually active creatures on earth. Unlike chimps but like humans, bonobo females are almost always sexually receptive, and same sex encounters are just as frequent as heterosexual intercourse. Unlike other animals but like humans, bonobos frequently make love face to face. In bonobo society having sex is the primary means of conflict resolution, a solution that even some married couples have learned to use.

With only a few observed exceptions, when different bonobo bands meet, they make love not war. (In a similar situation male chimps would fight.) The Japanese have been studying the bonobo for 34 years, and they have not observed a bonobo killing another bonobo.

Describing bonobos as "highly compassionate and conscious beings," Sally Coxe writes fondly about her interaction with Panbanisha, a bonobo female at Georgia State University. Panbanisha can understand English, use sign language, and spell out words on a keyboard. While playing hide-and-seek with Panbanisha, Coxe noticed that the bonobo recognized her name, and then made a gesture to Coxe to be quiet so that they would not be found. Responding to a small cut on Coxe's wrist, Panbanisha wrote out "hurt" on her keyboard.

The question of whether chimps and humans are hard-wired for violence has been addressed by Robert Spolsky, who has studied baboons most of his career. Male baboons are just as aggressive and abusive to their females as some male humans are. Spolsky documented remarkable behavioral changes in the particular band of baboons that he had been studying closely. The dominant males had been raiding the garbage dump of a hunting lodge, and all of them died as a result of eating tainted meat.

The troop's females were able to stage a velvet revolution, in which they were able to pacify the surviving less dominant males. Spolsky noted that "aggression was less frequent, particularly against third parties. . . . There were even instances, now and then, of adult males grooming each other--a behavior nearly as unprecedented as baboons sprouting wings."

This evidence, combined with other experiments in which babies from aggressive monkey species were pacified by less aggressive foster mothers, strongly suggests that primates are not "natural born killers," and that we can all, under the influence of nurturing females, learn to be nice to one another. And since we seem to have a lot of bonobo in us, we don't have a far to go as our chimp cousins.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read his columns as the "Palouse Pundit" at www.NickGier.com.