

The Pachyderm Parade
What We Can Learn from Elephants
About The Importance of
Multi-Generational Influence

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"Look at the animals and they will teach you," is what God told Job. By observing the world of animals we can learn about God's creativity and character as well as our own fallenness.

At our Wisdom Trek conference this last week Mario and Christine Tarasiuk from Miami Florida shared a piece of fascinating research from seven or eight years ago that had completely escaped my notice.

Guessing that it might have escaped your notice as well, I thought I'd share it with you because it relates strongly to the series we've been doing on the disengagement of twentysomethings from the church.

Youths on a Rampage

Several years ago at the Pilanesberg National Park, in the North West Province of South Africa, a program named Operation Genesis was formed to populate the park with thousands of animals of a variety of species.

With government control and no poaching, park rangers assumed that the animals would be safe from harm. Within a short period of time, however, they were finding a startlingly high number of mutilated carcasses of rhinoceros that had apparently been gored to death by young bull elephants on a rampage.

It is normal for bull elephants to enter "musth" (an intense period of aggressive behavior associated with reproduction) for short periods of time as adolescents. These periods increase in intensity and duration with age until reproduction actually takes place, usually at about

age 30.

Upon close observation, it became apparent that the young bull elephants had entered musth closer to age 18, and for unusually intense and prolonged periods. Because the onset of musth was not gradual and in the context of the community of the herd, these young elephants went berserk and became a danger to all those around.

Why? Were the animals in overcrowded conditions? Did the large number of human visitors create stress?

As researchers cast about for an explanation, rhinos continued to be killed and many of the elephants had to be destroyed as well. Meanwhile the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park in the KwaZulu Natal Province began discovering mysterious rhino deaths as well.

Finally a plausible theory emerged: perhaps these young bulls, orphaned from their families and translocated to the new parks, lacked the "socializing influence" of the older elephants in the herd.

The solution: introduce mature bull elephants from the Kruger National Park into the elephant herds in the new parks. As park managers took this step, they invited scientists from the University of Natal to study the results.

Here's what they found:

*There was some initial fighting amongst the introduced bulls and the young resident bulls as the mature elephants established their dominance.

*Most of the young bulls began "submitting" to the older bulls, trailing them all over the park.

*There were some disturbances between the introduced bulls, between the introduced bulls and the young resident bulls, and among the young resident bulls, but nothing deadly.

*Although the periods of "musth" (the aggressive, hormonal behavior associated with reproduction) were not entirely suppressed in the young bulls, these periods were significantly shortened.

*During the study period, there were no additional rhino deaths.

What Was Right In Their Own Eyes

It seems that God has built into the elephant species a natural hierarchy in which the presence of the elders prepares the youth for maturity.

When the elders stop having this influence, the youths enter into "maturity" in a rapid and intense fashion. Unable to properly guide their impulses, these youth are prone to irrational, risky and even hurtful behavior.

It's not hard to see the parallels to human beings, and such observations are backed up by Scripture. For example, in the book of Judges we're told that when the heroic Joshua died, the people lost their vision for obeying God and "did what was right in their own eyes."

It is desperately important that we reconnect the generations in our own day and establish a more natural maturation process.

But two barriers stand in the way:

*Psychological barriers: the belief by the older generation that influencing the next generation is either unimportant or too difficult, and the belief by the younger generation that the older generation is outdated and irrelevant.

*Physical barriers: the media, churches and schools have designed structures of efficiency that have the effect of segregating the generations by age. As a result the older and younger don't communicate together as much or share common interests.

Important But Not Urgent

In his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey argues that the best leaders spend only 20% of their time focusing on things that are urgent and important, and 80% focusing on that which is important but not yet urgent.

Most people, however, only pay attention to urgent needs. They don't plan ahead, and are thus always in a position of scurrying to and fro putting out fires.

I can't speak for other countries, but as an American my impression is that most people do not sense the urgency of passing of the baton to the next generation. It probably until the current generation begins retiring in massive numbers.

If present trends continue, we'll wake up ten years from now to discover that the generation receiving the baton is an "orphaned and translocated" generation that, due to falling birth rates, is 40% smaller than the previous generation. This generation is significantly more likely to be morally relativistic, to be oriented toward consuming rather than producing, and to be under-educated about the foundations of a good society. As a result America stands to lose most of its global influence within a generation.

This Ain't Rocket Surgery!

Please pardon the outrageously mixed metaphor, but it doesn't take a genius to see that preparing the next generation of leaders should be a top priority.

And the irony is that it's not that hard to get started. One GRTL subscriber, Stephen, wrote about a twentysomething young man his family befriended and invited over for a weekly meal.

As this young man prepares to be married and establish a family of his own, he has shared with Stephen and his family how they had mentored him in what a godly family looks like. Just spending time with Stephen's family realigned this young man's whole perspective on marriage and parenting!

Is it safe to say that NOW is the time for action? Is there ANY plausible objection that would stop us from acting decisively to reconnect the generations and begin passing the baton of faithfulness?

Please let me know how Passing the Baton International can

support you in this. Visit <http://www.passingthebaton.org> for more information.

It is said that elephants never forget. May historians say about our generation that we remembered what was most important and did everything we could to pass the baton of faithfulness to the next generation.

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How to get the past two newsletters on twentysomethings:

Winning the Hearts of the Twentysomethings

Send a blank e-mail to twentysomething@sonic.sparklist.com

Reaching Twentysomethings: Making the Connections

Send a blank e-mail to twentysomething2@sonic.sparklist.com

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More research on the elephants:

http://www.und.ac.za/und/lesci/elephant/clash_of_the_titans.htm

http://www.und.ac.za/und/lesci/elephant/ele_HUP_background.htm

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