

Rolheiser: A lesson in a parking lot

Our natural instincts serve us well, to a point. They're self-protective and that's healthy too, to a point.

Let me explain.

Recently I was at a football game with a number of friends. We arrived at the game in two cars and parked in the stadium's underground parking lot. Our tickets were in different parts of the stadium and so we separated for the game, each of us finding our own seats. When the game ended, I arrived at the cars with one of our party about ten minutes before the others showed up.

During that wait, my friend and I scanned the crowd, looking for members of our party. But our scanning eyes drew some unwelcome attention.

Two women approached us and, angrily, demanded why we had been looking at them: "Why were you looking at us? Are you trying to pick us up?"

That's when natural instinct cuts in. Immediately, before any rational reflection had a chance to mitigate my thoughts and feelings, there was an automatic flash of anger, of indignation, of injustice, of coldness, of shame, and, yes, of hatred.

Those feelings weren't asked for; they simply flooded in. And, with them, came the concomitant accusatory thoughts: "If this is the "Me Too" movement; I'm against it! This is unfair!"

Fortunately, none of this was expressed. I apologized politely and explained that we were scanning the crowd for our lost party. The women passed on, no harm done, but the feelings lingered, lingered until I had a chance to process them, set them into perspective, and honor them for precisely what they are, instinctual, self-protective, feelings that are meant eventually to be replaced by something else, namely, by an understanding that goes beyond reflexive reaction.

On reflection, I didn't see this incident as an aberration of the "Me Too" movement or as something to be indignant about. Rather, it helped me realize why there is a "Me Too" movement to begin with.

The reaction of these two women no doubt was triggered by a history of injustice that they themselves (or other women they've known) have experienced in terms of sexual harassment, unwanted solicitation, and gender violence – injustices that absolutely dwarf the mini-mosquito bite of "injustice" that I experienced by their gratuitous remark.

It's not without reason that this kind of exchange occurs in parking lots.

Recently, I read statistics from a study that concluded that more than 80% of women in America have experienced some form of sexual harassment in their lifetime.

In my naiveté, that figure seemed high, so I asked several women colleagues for their reaction to that statistic.

Their reaction caught both me and my naiveté by surprise. Their reaction: "80% is far too low; it's everyone! Rare is the woman who goes through life without experiencing some form of sexual harassment in her life."

Given that perspective, the paranoia expressed in the parking lot no longer seemed out of order.

Something else too: Reflecting further on this, I began to see more clearly the distance between natural instinct and mature empathy. Nature gives us powerful instincts that serve us well, to a point. They are inherently self-protective, selfish, even as they contain within them a certain amount of natural empathy.

Instinct can sometimes be wonderfully sympathetic. For example, we are naturally drawn to reach out to a helpless child, a wounded bird, or a lost kitten. But what draws us to these is still, however subtle, self-interest. At the end of the day, our reaching out to them makes us feel better and their helplessness poses absolutely no threat to us. Natural instinct can be quite empathic when it is not threatened in any way.

But the situation changes, and very quickly, when any kind of threat is perceived; when, to put it metaphorically, something or somebody "is in your face". Then our natural empathy slams shut like a trap door, our warmth turns cold, and every instinct inside us raises its self-interested head and voice. That's what I felt in the parking lot at the football game.

And the danger then is to confuse those feelings with the bigger truth of the situation and with who we really are and what we really believe in. At that point, natural instinct no longer serves us well and, indeed, is no longer protective of our long-term good. What's good for us long-term is, at that moment, hidden from our instincts.

At moments like this we are called to an empathy beyond any feelings of having been slighted and beyond the ideologies we can lean on to justify our indignation: "This is political correctness (of the right or the left) gone amuck! This is an aberration!"

Our feelings are important and need to be acknowledged and honored, but we're always more than our feelings.

We're called beyond instinct to empathy, to pray that the day will soon come when these two women, and their daughters and granddaughters, will no longer need to feel any threat in a parking lot.