

The Original Revenge of the Nerds by Lloyd Robertson

In the comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes", Calvin asks his tiger companion why humans are never content with what they have. Hobbes replies, "Are you kidding? Your fingernails are a joke, you've got no fangs, you can't see at night, your pink hides are ridiculous, your reflexes are nil, and you don't even have tails! Of course people aren't content!". Despite our handicaps, it is the tigers that are the endangered species and we hold their fate in our clawless hands. Psychologist Steven Pinker calls this "the original revenge of the nerds".

Our great brains have allowed us to use our weak but flexible hands and our incredible vocal cords to such advantage that we dominate every other mammal. We inhabit every ecosystem on the planet and we are even reaching out to other worlds. But this has come at a cost.

Human birthing is difficult due to the size of the infant's head. Even so, compared to other mammals, every human is born grossly premature. Human babies are helpless and they need a long time of care before their bodies and their brains reach a size where they can begin to care for themselves. Our brains are "gas guzzlers"; pound for pound our brains consume more energy than any other part of our bodies. And thinking requires tripling the brain's energy needs. It's hard work, which is probably why the majority of us spend 95% of the time with our brains idling.

Thanks to our brains we suffer from stress. Intelligent thinking works by dividing experiences into separate facts or events simple enough for the conscious mind to focus on one at a time. We focus on what is important and ignore the rest. That creates the possibility that we have overlooked something. Highly stressed people will sometimes compulsively replay events in their heads looking for something that had been overlooked. Their minds are revving furiously but are not in gear.

Thinking also requires that we review facts and events in series even tho they may be happening all at once. Reviewing things in series requires time. The intelligent person often feels that s/he is working against time.

The fruit of the "tree of knowledge" is understanding. We understand things that are not always pleasant. We understand that we have choices and that sometimes our instinctive reactions (like hitting the boss when we are upset) are not the best choice. We make mistakes, we worry, we know that we will, one day, die. Worst of all, we can imagine what might have been.

Oh, to have been born a relatively brainless ant who does not worry whether the trail of pheromones she is following was made by a fellow worker ant or by a cruel psychologist doing an experiment. The ant does what is genetically programmed and "knows" that a trail of pheromones is to be followed to its end even if that trail happens to be a circle.

Many people attempt to reduce their stress by becoming more like the ant. They replace "reason" with "faith". They want to be told what to think, what to believe, and what to do. In their search

for certainty, they may even want to give up their sense of "self" and merge with a human version of a colony or hive. We call that human ant colony a "cult".

I, for one, think that our great brains are worth all of the costs. I stand in awe before the beauty of the stars in a northern winter sky and eagerly read about each discovery of new planets circling those stars. I am amazed from recent research in biology from cloning to the development of self-replicating compounds - the precursor of life. I am actively involved in the new science of memetics which promises huge increases in our understanding of how cultures evolve. I want to know. I wouldn't trade my brain for anything.