

Guppies as Teachers

“From the viewpoint of absolute truth, what we feel and experience in our ordinary daily life is all delusion. Of all the various delusions, the sense of discrimination between oneself and others is the worst form, as it creates nothing but unpleasant.” Dalai Lama

I had one lonely guppy left in my fish tank. He was clearly a survivor.

I had put some lettuce leaves on the surface of the tank because the guppies loved to eat them but this time, a few hours after putting them in the tank, all the fish died... there was only one hardy little fish left. He had a beautiful, bright yellow tail and fins.

This had never happened before but now I was aware of my resistance to buying or eating lettuce again. The fish were, for me, like the canaries that were taken down into mines to measure the level of silent, invisible, killer gases dangerous to miners and I now had a new awareness of my vulnerability to silent, killer chemicals on the food I eat. I pondered how their lives had been a sacrifice for my awareness and changing life-style as I signed up a membership for the local organic food store.

I was about to go overseas for a month and so I never replaced the dead fish. When I returned, I wondered whether my fish, who typically lives in a large school, was lonely and went off to the pet store to buy him some companions. I chose four to start with. A yellow one, an orange one, a blue one and one with black spots on its yellow tail. Guppies come in the most amazing array of colors.

In my Pollyanna-ish, childlike imaginings, I thought how happy he would be to not be alone anymore. However, he did not seem pleased. In fact, he was chasing the other fish in a very unfriendly way! Again, in my optimism, I thought they would settle down and get used to one another, but no! He systematically harassed the orange fish until it died. Then he went for the blue one, and it died. Then he attacked the yellow one with black spots and it died. I sadly removed the little corpses from the tank. He has struck an uneasy truce with the last one that looks just like him.

Zora Neale Hurston, an American folklorist and writer once said, *“Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond me.”*

I laughed when I read this. In a similar way, it is beyond me that this guppy could not have enjoyed the beauty of his companions, but instead felt aggression, hardwired to attack anything that might in some guppy way be perceived to be a threat. In his ignorance and unawareness, perhaps he feared there would not be enough food, or there would be too many males to compete with, in the event of some females coming along...? That the others would gang up against him? Who knows?

I suppose one can't draw too many conclusions from a ten-gallon fish tank of guppies, but I have been pondering the lessons of the fish tank ever since. We are nature, and so what we observe is our nature too! The roots of discrimination go very deep way back in our evolution.

Exercise:

Get a fish tank and study the behavior of the fish carefully – they tell us everything about our fundamental brain stem functioning. In fact, study every creature and see if you can find your fight/flight instinct and ways of defending within yourself. How does this earliest of dynamics and function show up in a sophisticated way within you? With which animal do you identify? Why?