

Avatar:

SELF-DESIGNING TRAINING

by Harry Palmer

Science can demonstrate that certain physical characteristics are genetically encoded in an individual's DNA. One person's blue eyes and another's brown eyes can be traced to certain genetic configurations. Skin, scales, feathers, and hair, as well as thousands of other physical traits, can be explained in terms of inherited genetic material.

But what about instincts, social behaviors, human motives? Where do they come from?

I used to raise pigs as pets and observed that they were naturally adept at building shelters. That's probably where The Three

*...what about instincts, social behaviors, human motives?
Where do they come from?*

Little Pigs story comes from: the first little pig built his house of straw, the second little pig built his house of sticks, and the third little pig built his house of bricks. I think that last construction may have been a little creative license on the part of some storyteller. But pigs really do build shelters, and they are quite good at it.

I had a sow named Violet that could turn a soft piece of ground and a brush pile into a pig shelter in a few hours. She was a regular beaver. She'd drag branches and mouthfuls of sod together in a pile, and then she'd climb up on the pile and roll it flat. Then she'd drag on a few more branches and more mouthfuls of sod and roll it flat again.

At first I thought she was building a foundation, which would have been a mark of higher intelligence. Foundations are really a human invention. If you are doing an archeo-

logical excavation and you strike something that looks like a foundation, that's pay dirt. Foundations are evidence that a crossover has occurred from instinctive behavior to intelligent behavior. This applies not only to building shelters; it also applies to building lives.

Anyhow, the pig was building a shelter; she was just doing it from the top down. The matted pile of sticks and sod was her roof. Once it seemed satisfactory to her, she used her nose to lift the edge and crawled under the matted pile of brush. And then she stood up with the roof bending to the curve of her back and proceeded to push up dirt-pile-walls in a circle just slightly smaller than the diameter of her roof. Finally when the piles were a foot or so tall, she knelt down on her knees again and let the dome roof rest on the walls. I wondered if I wasn't looking at the natural archetype for cathedrals and capitol buildings.

She was very systematic. In a matter of an afternoon she finished a perfect one-pig-wide dome with a matted, waterproof roof over her head, and she built most of it from the inside!

I found it interesting that there was no exit, no door, although she could have easily made one. At first, I thought this was a mistake, but then if you are giving birth to 12 baby pigs that you want to keep track of, which she did a few hours later, you could appreciate her door-less design.

Violet had come from a commercial pig farm and had been born and raised in a concrete barn. How to build a shelter was not something she had learned from another pig; it was purely a product of instinct. I'm sure that the width of her snout and the color of her eyes were determined by genetic factors, DNA combinations. But her knowledge of shelters? Where did that come from? Was it

an evolved behavior developed over many generations by natural selection, stored somehow in a deep level of ...what?

GIMME SHELTER

When I was a kid I used to build huts all of the time. I think it must be a stage that kids go through in their development. Did you ever build tents out of blankets and chairs in the middle of the living room? It is a common, culturally independent behavior. It doesn't matter if your parents are Asian, Indian, Bedouin or whatever; there is a developmental stage, usually around the age of 4, when you desire to crawl under something. Shelter building is an instinctual echo within consciousness.

Go to an area that has experienced a war or a natural calamity, and you will see lots of shelter building. This instinctive behavior has been triggered. Even in the shock of some terrible tragedy, with logical thinking and reasoning shutting down, even in this totally overwhelmed condition, you'll see people tipping up a piece of cardboard or spreading out some plastic to create shelter. There's really not a lot of technical know-how needed to build a shelter. The urge is a deeply ingrained instinct—a nesting behavior that bridges the gap between self-preservation and the most elementary social behavior, sexual reproduction.

Watching Violet build her house and watching people's reaction to disaster has left me wondering if there is not some collective, transcendent consciousness counterpart that forwards instincts the same way that physical genes forward structural blueprints. Collective consciousness. What an amazing concept! It hints of magic, religion, evolution,

maybe even an unfolding cosmic design. That's the positive side.

On the negative side, it raises the possibility that we might be so influenced by the past that we fail to negotiate the future. Modeling the experiences of the past, even if they arise from something as remarkable and mysterious as a collective consciousness, is about as conservative as you can get. If it worked for granddad, then it will work for me. This is actually a pretty safe stepping-off point for a philosophy, but it doesn't take into account that the issues that granddad confronted successfully are no longer part of the challenge of living.

In the '60s, I did the hippie drop-out thing and returned to the land. The plan was to be self-sufficient, to grow my own food, build my own house, survive by my own efforts. You know something? It was the easiest thing I ever did. I discovered that all the problems of what to grow, when to plant, how to build had been solved for a hundred years. I had shelter, plenty to eat, and was bored to death. I felt I was on a path to extinction. Thriving did not necessarily mean that I was evolving which, when you get down to it, seems to be the goal of life.

I used to tell a story about a tropical rodent that evolved during the age of the dinosaur. This little quadruped was unique, because it was covered with thin, single-quilled feathers that you and I call hair.

Hair in the tropics was not a good idea; it didn't solve any existing environmental problems. In fact, it was a liability. The poor creature had to live underground and come out only at night, because its hair prevented it from dissipating body heat. Of course, it avoided a lot of cold-blooded predators that hunted in the heat of the day, but overall,

scales and thick hide were the fashion of the day.

It's not hard to imagine the great rulers of the Jurassic swamps looking at the small, hairy rodent burrowing into the ground, and hear them laughing. Hair! Living underground! What a freak!

Then it started to snow. A good taxonomy text will tell you the rest of the story. Rodents survived the ice age; dinosaurs didn't.

When you couple intelligence with self-designing, you awaken a power that is not only capable of coping with the future, it is capable of shaping the future.

Growing hair was actually pre-adaptive evolution. It didn't arise from past experience, or even from present experience, but was a mutation that occurred before the snows started. Call it dumb luck if you want to, but having hair and the ability to burrow prepared the ancestor of the Muridae family for the future. If there is some log of collective consciousness that is dutifully recording the experiences of life and designing instincts for the next generation, this mouse started a new chapter.

Pre-adaptive evolution was the beginning of intelligence. Maybe fur was just a serendip-

itous mutation in its first instance, but it added the lesson to the collective consciousness that sometimes you survive by breaking the patterns of the past. In that cosmic moment, life on this planet began to move beyond instincts into an exploration of intelligence—an exploration of choices and decisions and their consequences. In the broad scheme of things, instincts were being quietly usurped by an intelligence that could predict, develop new abilities, and restructure its behavior to thrive in the times ahead.

If the dinosaurs had had more intelligence rather than instincts, they might have survived the Ice Age wearing mouse-skin coats. The tool the dinosaurs lacked was Avatar.

The more sentient creatures become, the more self-designing they become. Self-designing is a fantastic ability. When you couple intelligence with self-designing, you awaken a power that is not only capable of coping with the future, it is capable of shaping the future.

Tens of thousands of Avatars are self-designing the qualities that will pre-adapt them to a social climate change that is just beginning. They are developing social hair—the ability to see others compassionately, the ability to trust, the ability to share, the ability to act rationally in service to others.

An enlightened rain is beginning to fall.