

I

SANDBOATS

Years ago I heard a story about fleas. It went something like this: Get some fleas. Put the fleas in a jar. Poke holes in the lid and screw the lid on the jar. Watch the fleas jump around in the jar. You'll notice that they will jump all over the jar. They will even bounce right off the lid of the jar. Wait for a couple of days and then remove the lid.

You would think it would be a jailbreak for the little guys. The way the story goes, though, the fleas do not jump out after the lid is removed because they learned earlier they cannot jump out, now they don't even try.

After a little online cruising, I found that the story came from Zig Ziglar's book, *See You at the Top*. Evidently, within the thriving flea circus industry, a need exists to train fleas to stay in one place for extended periods of time. Can't say I've ever seen a flea circus. Nevertheless this all must be accurate because, as many a high school student has said, "Dude, it's true. I Googled it."

During my online excursion I also learned some fun facts to know and tell about fleas, like:

- The largest recorded flea is the North American

Hystriechopsylla schefferi, measuring twelve millimeters in length—almost ½-inch!

- The female flea consumes fifteen times her own body weight in blood daily.
- Some fleas can jump 150 times their own length. That compares to a human jumping 1,000 feet. One flea broke a record with a four-foot vertical jump.¹

If you Google “fleas, jar” you will find approximately 116,000 web pages that will tell you the “fleas in a jar” story in its various forms. You will also learn there are about 116,000 multi-level marketers who are pretty sure you are not living up to your full potential in life. About twelve web pages into my online foray, my skepticism about Pavlovian fleas began to be whipped into a frenzy. In an attempt to soothe my aching doubt, I decided to put the story to the test. OK, in reality, my kids were bored one summer morning and since I’d always wanted to know about the fleas ...

The family dogs met the experiment with mixed emotions. Bessie Belle, the bulldog-boxer mix, is a sucker for any kind of attention. It didn’t matter that the kids were pulling tufts of hair off of her in the full-body gropefest. She was in heaven. Buster, the fox-bird-snake-squirrel-rat-possum terrier was much less impressed.

The first realization came after about three months of searching for our fleas: Flea prevention technology has obviously progressed exponentially from where it was when I was a kid. Back in the day, we had the flimsy white flea collar that supposedly killed the fleas on

contact as they made their way to water themselves at the dog's nose.

Let's get past the fact that this explanation never sat well with me either.

With our current flea and tick regimen it took us two months to find two fleas. Two months! Who knew?

We finally get our two fleas in a jar. Sure enough, just like the story said, there they were jumping around like crazy. Also, just like the story said, they bounced off the inside of the lid over and over and over again.

After a couple of days we took the lid off the jar. Sure enough those fleas absolutely did not jump out of that jar. The explanation quickly became apparent for why fleas don't jump out of the jar when the lid is removed.

They're dead.

OK, if they're not dead they have beaten themselves into a vegetative state. When the lid came off, one of the unlucky participants was DOA. The other one was making eerie spastic jerking movements, which traumatized the seven- and ten-year-old children.

All in all, we're going to say the fleas-in-a-jar experiment was not a success.

I'm not saying fleas can't learn to stay in a confined space. I'm just saying it sure looked like our two fleas beat themselves to death trying to get out of their little prison.

Our fleas-in-a-jar experiment was a little disappointing. There was a part of me that wanted to see the process work. It didn't. It did, however, put some things into perspective for me. It made me think about my life. It

made me think about how, for many years of my life, I felt like I was beating myself to death against an invisible ceiling. One day, as I reflected on those years of my life, I was driving down Ocean Drive in Corpus Christi, Texas, watching the sailboats out on the bay. Seeing the sailboats glide effortlessly through the water seemed to jostle this memory loose. Memories are shadowy at first, but as this one became clear in my mind, I began to see how it could help illustrate this problem of identity theft.

My friend Jack was on a business trip. He finished his presentation early and had some time before he had to get to the airport. Since he was in a beach town, he thought he would head over and enjoy the seashore for a while.

He was only at the beach a few minutes before he noticed a sailboat out in the distance. It caught his attention because it just stayed in one spot. It was in the ocean but it wasn't sailing. It quickly became obvious that the sailboat had become stuck on a sandbar as the tide receded.

Jack could tell there was a family in the boat and it seemed like the father needed help. So Jack rolled up the pant legs of his suit and waded out to see if he could help. After a couple of hours of digging and pushing and pulling, the sailboat was out of the sand and back into the ocean where it belonged—gliding freely through the water.

When Jack told this story, he was simply relaying this really odd thing that happened to him on his last

business trip. The story was full of strange twists and turns that mostly centered on how foolish Jack was feeling while he was digging a boat out of the sand in a business suit while the children clambered around the boat without a care in the world. I, however, was captivated by the image of this sailboat stuck in the sand. To me it painted such a clear picture of our lives.

That sailboat was created. It was built piece by piece by a master builder. In his mind's eye, the builder could see this sailboat before it was even finished. He knew what color he was going to paint it. He knew how it would sit in the water. He knew how it would lean over in a heavy wind. The master builder intended every part that he crafted to fit together into a beautiful, sleek sailboat that would slide effortlessly through the waves.

Yet at the time Jack saw this boat it was beached; run aground amidst the very ocean it was intended to master with grace and elegance. Stuck in the sand it was nothing more than a glorified, intimately crafted playground attraction. Stuck in the sand the sailboat was no longer a sailboat. It was a sandboat. And as long as it sat in the sand, it was never going to fulfill the purpose it was so carefully crafted for.

Like the sailboat, intimately crafted in the master builder's workshop, you and I have been knit together in our mother's womb. We have been designed and built by a Master Craftsman. You existed in the mind of God before you became the masterpiece you are now. You are the tangible manifestation of the intangible thoughts of God. You are the visible expression of the love of God.

Identity Theft

“Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, God had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love.”²

He made every part of you with the specific intent that you spend your days gliding through the waters of life. Unfortunately, though, many of us are like that sailboat. We are stuck.

Graciously, because it is made of wood and canvas, a sailboat has no idea it is stuck. It cannot grasp the tragedy of its predicament. As cognitive human beings, though, many of us sit stuck in the sand fully aware of our reality.

I don’t know about you but there have been times in my life when I have felt like a colossal, world class, Olympic size *sandboat*. I’ve also spent twenty years in ministry looking into the bewildered eyes of a humanity that looks longingly to the sea for answers the sea will never give them. Life may be the ocean that you were meant to sail through, but life itself is never going to give you the answers you need. We are stuck because we have been robbed. Our very identity has come into question. We have been told we are *sandboats* when we know full well we are *sailboats*.

2

BITTERSWEET SYMPHONY

*'Cause it's a bittersweet symphony this life. Trying to
make ends meet you're a slave to money then you die.*

—THE VERVE

“BITTERSWEET SYMPHONY”

*There is no theory of evolution. Just a list of animals
Chuck Norris allows to live.*

—CHUCKNORRISFACTS.COM

*Freedom: A state of living without being subject to
restraint.*

—WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY

Back in the sixties things were different. I don't mean Haight-Ashbury, Woodstock, or any of the other iconic places or events that defined that era. I'm talking about the zoo. As the sixties turned to the seventies, I was only six so I don't remember much. But I do remember the zoo.

I remember going to the Houston Zoo when I was a kid. The lions and tigers and primates were in, well

there's really no other way to say it: they were in jail. I remember walking along this long row of large cages. Each cage contained a different species of monkey. I have this distinct memory of passing by each cage looking at the monkeys as they would look back at me. I thought it was odd, but at six years old I had no idea why I thought it was odd. As I look back at it now, it was not that I felt sorry for the monkeys because they were in cages. I felt sorry for them because the cages were so sterile—nothing but steel bars and concrete floors.

Nowadays it's different. Zoos have invested big money in "exotic habitats." The habitats are large and authentically landscaped. The last time I visited a zoo, I'm not sure I actually ever saw an animal. That makes me feel much better for the animals but because they blend in so well in such a large environment, they are almost impossible to see.

This is definitely not a plug for PETA or The Humane Society. It is interesting to note, though, that we have moved from small, sterile cages to large, authentic habitats as a means of displaying wildlife. It seems, at some level, we have recognized that to confine a wild animal to a sterile cage is to diminish it.

A majestic lion in a sterile cage is akin to a beautiful sailboat stuck on a sandbar. Concrete and steel have a way of draining the ferocious majesty right out of the king of beasts.

To come face to face with a 500-pound lion when it is behind two inches of bullet-proof safety glass is one thing. To come face to face with a 500-pound lion in the

African savannah is a completely different experience. I once saw a video on YouTube that showed this in vivid detail.

This video began with a large male lion pacing in the distance, partially obscured by tall savannah grasses. As he turns broadside to the camera, a shot rings out and the lion drops from view. A second later his head pops up above the tall grass. Watching the video I had the sense the lion is thinking to himself, *What the heck just happened?*

The video cuts to a group of hunters running to the right of the screen. They pull up and begin to fire. It takes a second to figure out what is happening. The *massive* lion is charging the hunters, dust popping up from the ground around it as they continue to fire at it. As it approaches the group at full speed it rears back on its hind legs to attack one of the hunters. Instantaneously another hunter has crouched to one knee and gets off an extremely lucky shot, knocking the lion off balance. The lion flies by its intended mark and rolls violently in the dust—but not before it got a piece of one of the hunters. The segment ends with the lion fleeing as the hunters continue to fire at it.

I was captivated by this video because it pitted one lion against five people, five people with some of the biggest guns on the face of the planet. Twelve seconds and seven rifle shots into the chaotic scene, the lion is still alive, has almost ripped one person to shreds and one set of incredibly lucky hunters are fortunate they did not shoot one or more of their own hunting party.

Identity Theft

The hunters in this video learned in life-flashing-before-your-eyes fashion why lions are called apex predators.

Chuck Norris or not, one-on-one in the wilderness, a lion will own you. To me, a lion in a cage brings a sadness to my heart for the simple reason that its identity as a ferociously beautiful creation has been diminished.

Diminishing the identity of a flea, a sailboat, a monkey, or a lion is one thing. Diminishing the identity of a human being is on a completely different moral plane. Some of the great atrocities in the world have occurred after one group of people has diminished the identity of another group of people. Serbia, Rwanda, Cambodia, and Nazi Germany are only a few recent examples of what happens when people are reduced to something other than human. The atrocities themselves are reprehensible, but a greater evil was first committed when the identity of others was diminished. Italian Holocaust survivor Primo Levi wrote,

Before dying the victim must be degraded so that the murderer will be less burdened by guilt. This is an explanation not devoid of logic but it shouts to heaven; it is the sole use of useless violence.¹

Degrading, devaluing, or diminishing the identity of a human being is evil. It is an evil that reaches the ears of God and pierces his very heart.

Like a lion in a sterile cage, part of our humanity—our human identity—is based on freedom. Like a sailboat's ability to glide effortlessly through the water and like

a lion's ability to roam uncontested through the wild, mankind has been given a gift of matchless value. It is the gift of free will. It is a gift unique among all living creatures. It is the essence of the human identity.

The words "free will" cannot be spoken without some idea of what "free" means. Webster's defines "freedom" as the "total absence of restraint." Most people would agree with that definition not just in principle but also in practice. Our lives seem to bear that out. In many ways life seems to be less about the pursuit of *happiness* and more about the pursuit of *less restraint*.

Less time at work.

Less time driving to work.

Less time away from the family.

Less time making money (more time spending it!).

Less time doing what others want.

Less time doing what I have to do.

Humanity's romance with this kind of freedom has blinded us to this truth: True freedom has nothing to do with a lack of restraint. This blindness has diminished us and this is not the only way our human dignity is degraded when we throw off restraint in pursuit of what we want.

A young girl's virginity is taken.

A father communicates to his son that he is worthless and will never amount to anything.

A prisoner of war is humiliated.

A husband tells his wife he is leaving.

An employer takes advantage of an employee.

A mother tells her daughter she should dress

differently so the boys will like her. All of the above have diminished someone's identity as someone else—a parent, boss, boyfriend—pursued their own “freedom.”

I am pure. I am valuable. I am desired. I am the object of affection. I am safe. I am whole. I am confident. I am free. When these things are taken from someone, it is more than wrong, unfortunate, or counter-productive. Diminishing the God-given identity of another is an act of violence against the soul, against God himself.

It is evil.

Whether we want to admit it or not, we have suffered much the same fate as the fleas in the jar. Our identity has been diminished when we believe the definition of “freedom” as simply the lack of restraint. Our identity has been diminished when we do not engage our free will for the simple purpose of experiencing freedom. What if our definition of freedom has kept us from understanding true freedom? What if the reality of freedom is far greater than a mere lack of restraint?

We are a culture that is built upon individual liberty and freedom: freedom to assemble, freedom to bear arms, and freedom of the press. Could it be that in our almost neurotic preoccupation with freedom that we have completely missed what individual freedom really is? At least what it means to be truly free?

Our view of freedom is skewed because we have made a basic error in how we define freedom. We have made the faulty assumption that freedom is an end in itself. Because we have made this assumption, freedom is something we pursue as a destination, as a goal, as

Bittersweet Symphony

a place we will arrive at. As we will see, however, true freedom is not an end in itself. As lofty as our ideals of freedom are, true freedom is of a completely different nature.

Our view of freedom is jaded because our identity has been compromised, assaulted, and in some cases straight-up stolen. That's OK, though. We're in good company.