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### The Power of Inborn Human Behavior

Do you remember learning how to yawn? I'm going to go ahead and guess that the answer is no. This would be completely understandable because there was no specific moment in your life when someone looked into your little baby eyes and said in a sweet, slow voice, "Okay, honey, now yawn, like this 'aaaaawh'. Good!" It is also most likely true that no one ever looked into your little baby eyes and said, "Okay, darling, now this is how you judge and categorize human beings." No one ever taught you these things because you didn't need to learn them. Humans are born with the extraordinary ability to do these things because they are natural, innate actions, be it good or bad. Although yawning may seem like a mundane, uninteresting everyday activity, Malcolm Gladwell shows us that it is connected with so much more through his book *The Tipping Point*. He discusses ways in which yawning is related to everything from fashion trends to crime rates. With his ideas in mind, we can even say that yawning is in some ways related to prejudice. Toni Morrison exemplifies the strikingly sneaky manner in which prejudice can invade someone's life in her short story "Recitatif". It's something that can slip under the radar; something you might not even realize is there. Something as prosaic and natural as yawning.

Malcolm Gladwell's best-selling book *The Tipping Point* studies in depth the phenomenon of ingrained human behaviors. He shows us how people behave through discussing fashion trends and crime rate and even the spread of disease. But, what I find especially important about his discussion is his mention of yawning. Gladwell takes these well-known, recognized actions of following fashion trends or contributing to the drop in crime rate, witnessing and being part of an epidemic, and relates them to the also well-known but less noted activity of yawning. People yawn every day and don't think about it, but in reality, yawning is an incredibly powerful act. In Gladwell's own words, yawning is so powerful that "just because you read the word 'yawning' in the previous two sentences—and the two additional 'yawns' in this sentence—a good number of you will probably yawn within the next few minutes" (10). What he means to say by this is that yawning is very contagious! Yawning is not a disease or a virus but in many ways it's even more contagious than anything that is. You can't get Ebola simply by looking at someone who has Ebola, but you can most definitely yawn just by seeing someone else yawn. In fact, you don't even need to see it because, as Gladwell explains "if you play an audiotape of a yawn to blind people, they will yawn too" (20). But he isn't just telling us this so we'll know little fun facts about yawning. He wants us to see that yawning is something that is not learned but rather imbedded in the human repertoire and, as opposed to being insignificant like many think, it is rather profound. If one considers the reasons to why we yawn perhaps the full scope of its depth can be appreciated.

When it comes down to it, human beings are animals. Our ultimate goal in life as living organisms is to survive and reproduce. As a result, human beings (and all other animals) will do whatever it takes to reach this goal. Humans did not start out being solitary creatures like a lone

polar bear but rather as dependent beings, like a pack of wolves. If one is to survive as a pack animal, it must do as the pack does. It must learn what works and what doesn't and follow accordingly. And it must do this because if it does not it will no longer be a part of the group and ultimately it will find a lonely death. Someone a long, long time ago yawned and found out it works. They thought "wow, I feel like I suddenly have more oxygen in my brain" or something to that effect. People continued yawning from there on out because it did in fact help them reach their highest goal of surviving. The trait of yawning was gained and forever stored in the human hard drive. It is in this same way that humans gained the trait of dependence on other humans. Although it is not as strong as it once was, not a matter of life or death in most situations, it is still present and still strong. We also gained the basic desire, or need, to be and remain part of the group, or *a* group in general, because long ago if we weren't we'd die. These days the group may manifest in a slightly different way, but it still serves the same purpose. People relate themselves to their race, their religion, their sexual orientation, their likes and dislikes and pick a pack that suits them because of this innate need to be part of a group. But inclusion in a group for some means seclusion from that group for others. For example, not everyone can be part of the Latino group because then it wouldn't really be a group. There is no way for certain people to be included without others being excluded. So, in a way, it is ingrained in our human behavior to exclude people who are different than us because we need to be part of a group and they just don't fit. We attach meaning to the different groups of mankind and, as much as we would like it to not be true, this leads to segregation and prejudice. What is truly innate is what will aid us in surviving and reproducing—yawning and being part of a group. What isn't innate is what comes

from that—resenting and harboring hatred towards those who are not part of our group. The categorization of human beings is an inevitable and necessary part of life. The racism that sometimes comes along with it is neither inevitable nor necessary; it is an ugly side effect of a natural action.

World renowned author, Toni Morrison, wrote a short story called “Recitatif”. It is not about yawning. It is not about two young girls living in an orphanage and yawning. It is not about these two young girls witnessing and participating in yawning and it is definitely not about how yawning forever changed and controlled their lives. That would just be silly. Morrison decided instead to write about two young girls, Twyla and Roberta, who grew up together in an orphanage and witnessed, participated in and eventually felt the power of prejudice. A bit more interesting, no? Twyla and Roberta were the best of friends when they were living together in room 406 of St. Bonny’s orphanage. They were inseparable. They were the only two in the whole orphanage that “weren’t real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky” (Morrison 158). Roberta and Twyla were their own pack. A pack is not definite, stagnant, everlasting. A pack changes with circumstance, and the circumstances of the young girls recently changed dramatically. Before entering the orphanage their pack was their race, but now their pack is “the-not-real-orphans-whose-parents-are-not-beautiful-or-dead-or-in-the-sky”. This goes to show that our pack is what’s important, not the race of our pack. The need to categorize and be a part of something is what is innately human, not racism. No matter how much we deny it, human beings have an ingrained need to judge and organize people into groups so that they themselves can be designated to a group and belong somewhere. It is this behavior that kept Twyla and Roberta together in their own little pack, and it is also this behavior that drove them apart later in life.

Just as the circumstances changed when they entered the orphanage, they changed when they left as well. In the real world, Twyla and Roberta aren't the only two little girls whose parents aren't beautiful angels, and suddenly what was once so important loses all significance. Their group is no more, thus they must be part of a different one. They once again become a part of their race pack. These two women shared a lasting experience together, they were the best of friends, but when they run into each other years later they "passed like strangers. [They were just] a black girl and a white girl meeting in Howard Johnson's on the road and having nothing to say" (Morrison 165). Just a black girl and a white girl, categorized and divided. At this point the natural need to divide had developed into the unnatural need to harbor resent and racism. When Twyla and Roberta run into each other and Roberta treats Twyla like a stranger or worse, her explanation was "Oh, Twyla, you know how it was in those days: blacks—whites. You know how everything was" (Morrison 166). But the fact that there had to be "a way things were/are" between races is what doesn't add up. Roberta spoke of this "way things we" as if it was common knowledge, no big deal. But Twyla didn't even recognize that there was a certain way things were. This demonstrates that racism is a paradigm of our minds; different for everyone but still present nonetheless. Everyone classifies themselves and others in order to be part of something. They exclude others because if they didn't they themselves couldn't be included. But they treat other races in a certain way? They have a false negative image of people because of the group they are in? The animosity is the part that is not necessary; the part that doesn't help us survive, but rather sets us back in doing so.

The two girls were taken from their parents, Twyla because her mother was busy "dancing" and Roberta because her mother was sick. They were brought to an orphanage and

stuck in a room together. The story opens on the two girls meeting for the first time and the one that is narrating the story, Twyla, remarking that “it was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning—it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race” (Morrison 157). Immediately race is a prevalent issue in this story. But, oddly enough, Morrison does not disclose the races of the two young girls. She leaves that up to the reader to decide. Not only does this make the story a bit more interesting, like a mystery of sorts, it actually adds a very important factor that would otherwise be missed—the prejudice of the reader. “Oh no, no, no I *have* no prejudice!” some may argue. But the truth is if you’re a human being, descendent from that pack, you do. You judge and analyze and categorize. To what extent is debatable but it is always there to some degree. Toni Morrison brings this up in us by “hinting” at what race each character may be without actually telling us. Morrison says Twyla’s mother tells her in regards to people of Roberta’s race that “they never washed their hair and they smelled funny” (Morrison 157). The reader may think, “Black people don’t wash their hair very often, right?” or “white people can smell pretty weird.” It doesn’t matter what verdict they reach on who’s what, just that that verdict had to be reached for some reason. That reason is, you guessed it, because it is a natural, innate thing that humans do.

Yawning and categorizing; humans being humans. Everybody yawns and everybody walks into the room just as Twyla did and thinks something about the other person standing there. They may think “they’re like me” or maybe “they aren’t like me”. That is expected and seemingly inescapable, therefore acceptable. It isn’t bad that we are always going to create groups and separate everyone from our grandmas, to that guy over there in Timbuktu, and even ourselves into them. It isn’t bad because it’s unavoidable. But it *is* bad when we take these

observations and blow them out of proportion and giving them much more meaning than they actually deserve. When we attempt to eliminate an entire group because they are different, when we create on-going fights and resentment and when we hang on to these feelings. *That* is bad. Recognizing that there is nothing wrong with thinking about people and thinking about ourselves and being part of a group and not being part of a group will not entirely eliminate genocide and fighting. But with this knowledge we can better understand why it happens and take steps towards stopping it. We can even bridge the gap, bringing races closer together by changing our circumstances just like Twyla and Roberta did. We can group ourselves based on our favorite activities instead of our skin color, our values instead of our ancestry. So really this innate human behavior of being part of a group is as important, as common and as perpetual as yawning. It is something that will always be a part of us. Something that we should embrace and use to our advantage to remind us that, even though we are all in different groups, we all came from that one pack and we will forever be linked to it.

## Works Cited

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