

Calvin, Hobbes, and the Meaning of Life  
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A panel from the old comic Calvin and Hobbes shows Calvin sitting at his desk with a book, pencil and paper cast in front of him and a look of disgust on his face. He complains to his tiger friend Hobbes, “I wish I could just take a pill to be perfect, and I wish I could just push a button to have anything I want.” Hobbes sighs, “The American Dream lives on.” But Calvin doesn’t get it. Reluctantly picking up his book, he gripes “Why should I have to *work* for anything? It’s like saying I don’t deserve it!”

I miss Calvin and Hobbes. Bill Watterson was funny. He could draw. And in Calvin he created a perfect six-year-old: narcissistic, resistant to authority, resentful of his impotence in the face of more powerful babysitters, eager for a snowball fight, a sore loser when hit by a water balloon but with wild imaginings of superpowers that could eliminate bathtime, schools and homework forever. Loveable, but pretty realistic.

And I liked Calvin and Hobbes too because of their names. Allegedly, the cartoonist titled his strip in mock homage to his political science degree from Kenyon College, referencing both John Calvin, the sixteenth century theologian and Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth century philosopher. Both thinkers exercised a tremendous influence on the birth of America and the modern world. And both held fairly dark views about human nature.

John Calvin preached the total depravity of the human soul, our original rebellion against God and miserable failure to live as our Maker intends. You don’t have to read the whole book, just take one of the chapter headings from Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “EVERY THING PROCEEDING FROM THE CORRUPT NATURE OF MAN DAMNABLE.” Meanwhile Thomas Hobbes in his treatise *Leviathan* imagined that in their natural, primeval state human beings were entirely selfish, engaged in a fierce competition of each against each, a war of the one against the many. Of course, Hobbes had never observed people in a state of nature. He was myth-making, living in

an historical moment when nations were just emerging out of the feudal past, trying to legitimize or rationalize why some ruled over others. So he envisioned society or government as a kind of huge protection racket, where the autonomous individual ceded most of his or her independence to a strongman who could offer security in exchange for loyalty and obedience.

Here's an illustration. On the schoolyard, Calvin (not the theologian, but our cartoon friend) meets the bully Moe, a hulking brute twice his size with a bad case of early onset testosterone who demands the pipsqueak hand over his favorite toy truck. Calvin protests, "It's mine, Moe. I brought it from home." "I said gimme the truck," Moe insists, reaching for it. "Moe, you can't just *take* things from people because you're bigger." Moe's left hand lifts Calvin into the air by his shirt collar while the right hand clenches into a menacing fist. "I'm not taking the truck," the bully declares. "You're *giving* it to me because we'll both be so much happier that way." Defeated, his toy gone, Calvin sits down in the dust with his head in his hands. "That sounds reasonable," he whimpers.

Now imagine schoolyard politics on a global scale. That's how the world operates, said Hobbes. The strong terrorize the weak. The weak occasionally band together in mutual defense. But society basically resembles a playground in permanent recess, composed of eight-year-old kids with no adult supervision scrapping and wrestling to see who gets to the top of the jungle gym. Things devolve pretty quickly.

That was how William Golding envisioned it in his bestselling and chilling novel *Lord of the Flies*. There a group of British schoolboys find themselves marooned on a desert island when their plane goes down. It's a perfect laboratory. At long last, we have the privilege of observing what Hobbes never could: human beings in the pure state of nature. Surrounded by tropical seas and lush vegetation, the boys think they've landed in paradise, a veritable Garden of Eden. Best of all, there are no grown-ups, no babysitters, no pesky teachers like Calvin's Ms. Wormwood to spoil the fun. And that is the boy's top priority: first, to party, next, to survive, then to build a fire as a signal to

passing ships while they await rescue. There is feasting and frolicking aplenty. But the boys quickly become a gang, their elected leader becomes a mob boss, the fire goes untended. They shed their decency as quickly as their school uniforms and other clothing, sharpening their spears and daubing their naked bodies with warpaint as they hunt down first the island's wild pigs and then prey on each other. By the time a British naval vessel discovers the lost children, three of them are dead. Walking ashore, an officer in his dress whites views the mayhem, remarking that "I thought a pack of British schoolboys would have been able to put on a better show than that."

Golding's novel sold millions because it struck a nerve. Published in 1951, the public was just becoming aware of the Holocaust and Stalin's purges and the looming danger of thermonuclear war. The doctrine of human depravity seemed real enough. Life truly was as Hobbes described it: mean, nasty, brutish and short. And those ideas had a lasting impact on who we are today. Together, John Calvin and Thomas Hobbes help explain America's hyper-individualism, our divisiveness, why we tend to view our neighbors as threats or rivals more than comrades or helpmates, why our prison population is exploding and gun sales are booming. After all, the world is a dangerous place and people are not to be trusted.

This idea is so common that when it's contradicted, it makes headlines, like "man bites dog." But imagine if the world resembled less a giant protection racket than some laid-back kibbutz or socialist collective. It would be printed in big type, special edition. So the press paid attention when Dutch historian Rutger Bregman revealed that he had unearthed a true but almost forgotten story of six British boys castaway on the tiny rocky island of Ata off the coast of Tasmania. All were students at a Catholic boarding school in the south sea archipelago of Tonga, at that time a British protectorate. Sick of the school food and probably sick of the nuns with their strict discipline, the boys decided to "borrow" a fishing boat and set out on an adventure. Without a compass, but with a sack of bananas and a few coconuts and portable gas stove, they headed for Fiji, five hundred miles away, supposing they might even reach New Zealand. Then they fell asleep. Bad mistake. They woke in the midst of gale with the rudder torn away and the

sails in tatters, drifting for eight days during which they carefully rationed food and water until they finally landed on a seldom visited mass of rock considered uninhabitable on the nautical charts of the time. All in their early teens, they lived together on that truly desert island for fifteen months. The school and their families gave them up for lost. Funerals were conducted. But the youngsters weren't dead, only shipwrecked.

Finally rescued in September of 1966, the boys had survived so long on fish and seabird's eggs, cultivating the starchy taro root they found growing there and taming a few chickens that had been abandoned when the island was briefly populated centuries before. When they landed, they'd made a pact never to quarrel and to take time out if arguments arose. Those who came to harsh words went to separate ends of the island for a cool down. With driftwood, they'd somehow fashioned a guitar and began each day with a song and ended each day with a prayer. Peter Warner, the captain of the ship that finally found them wrote in his memoir that "by the time we arrived, the boys had set up a small commune with food garden, hollowed-out tree trunks to store rainwater, a gymnasium with curious weights, a badminton court, chicken pens and a permanent fire, all from handiwork, an old knife blade and much determination." And unlike the fictional children from William Golding's novel, the boys never let their flame go untended, never let their fire go out.

Human beings aren't all bad, not even adolescent boys. We're social creatures, not atomized individuals. We're wired for empathy so that, even as infants, when our mother smiles we smile back. We're natural born mimics and, according to author Rutger Bregman, that's our saving grace. When someone laughs, we chuckle too. When we see a tight-rope walker on the high wire, our own tummy gives a lurch. A yawn inspires a yawn. We have capacities for altruism and generosity and sympathy, love and tenderness. Even for heroism.

For example, Roberta Ursery was on a Florida beach three years ago when she realized she'd lost sight of her two sons, 8 and 11 years old. Then, horrified, she saw the boys were caught in a riptide, rapidly being carried out to sea. Both were about 300

yards off shore. Panic. What do you do? Roberta began to shout for help. But there were no lifeguards. She told a reporter, "I was like, we need to do something because they were yelling at us to throw a rope or throw something to them and nobody had anything. You know, you don't go to the beach bringing a rope. So my husband was with some guys and they were like, well, we can't find a rope, but we can make one. And so they made a human chain with all the people that were gathered on the beach." Eighty people clasped hand-to-hand, wrist to wrist, even grandmothers, to form a lifeline that finally reached the boys and brought them home. Spontaneously, without any supervision or direction from above, they not only did the right thing, but formed a plan to keep everyone safe and whole. Somehow that unrelated, unacquainted assembly of *Homo sapiens* had the manners, morals, and innate instinct to help the helpless, to aid the afflicted, to care for others.

Because that's the way it works, even in the funnies.

Bill Watterson says that a turning point in his comic strip came one morning when his wife went outside and found a dead kitten in the yard, at which point the story practically wrote itself. Earlier cartoons had revolved around relatively simple gags. He'd never thought to engage Calvin in existential questions about the meaning of life. But there he is, the child pointing down and exclaiming, "Hobbes, look! There a little racoon on the ground." Kneeling, Hobbes asks, "Is it alive?" "I think so, but he's hurt. See, he's hardly breathing." "Better not touch him if he's hurt," ponders Hobbes. "Yea. You wait here and guard him. I'll run and get mom." "I sure hope she can help." "Of course she can!" assures Calvin, running home. "You don't get to be mom if you can't fix everything just right."

Over the course of the next half dozen strips, they put the baby animal in a little shoebox. Calvin reads everything he can about racoons and offers to donate his dinner, having learned that these critters are just about omnivorous. The tiger agrees that animals are always adorably cute. They hope and worry and lose sleep until finally

Dad breaks the sad news that the racoon died during the night, at which point Calvin bursts into tears. "At least he died warm and safe, Calvin," comforts Dad. "We did all we could, but now he's gone." "I know," sniffs the little boy, hand on his chest, "I'm crying because out there he's gone but he's not gone inside me."

Calvin reflects in the final strip, "This is where Dad buried the little racoon," standing with Hobbes beneath a backyard tree. "I didn't even know he existed a few days ago and now he's gone forever. It's like I found him for no reason. I had to say good-bye as soon as I said hello. Still ... in a sad, awful, terrible way, I'm happy I met him ... Sniff ... What a stupid world."

Out of the mouths of babes. It is a stupid world, often heartbreaking, sometimes random, too often violent. But life is not mean, it's precious. It's not nasty, it's sweet or at least bittersweet. It's not brutish, it's filled with human feelings of endearment and goodwill. Yet the philosopher was right about this: life is short. So, my friends, let us cherish this time together.