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What I Learned From Primitive Man

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What I learned from primitive man



A FEW MONTHS AGO I went to live among the primitives. Along with a small group of anthropology students, I lived among the Warli tribals in the Thana district of western India.

The bustling city of Bombay lay only eighty miles away, but it might have been on Mars. The Warli hamlets are too insignificant to grace any map, large or small; only last year the government built a dirt road in the district. The people draw their water from a well and look forward to the day when electricity will light up their mud huts.

We came to observe, not to teach. But before long it was obvious that a lot of teaching *was* going on; the primitives were teaching us!

We built a wood fire and cooked our own food on it. At night we sat around it and yarned. We bathed in a stream about a mile away, or drew water from the well. We ate the simple food of the Warlis—rice, *dahl* (lentils), and a few greens.

No refrigerators. No TV. No foam-rubber padding. Not even a Hershey bar!

And it was all satisfying.

Suddenly the mass of modern gadgets seemed irrelevant. We saw a life-style stripped of all nonessentials, in which the moments of birth and death, marriage and childbirth, love and play stood out. We saw these moments in a new and fresh light. And we liked what we saw: the beauty and the glory of this thing called "life."

We had met an old man in one of the hamlets. Had he ever ridden on the bus which now passes once a day down the dusty road? "No," he said, "it is better to walk."

That was the first lesson from the primitives: to find oneself.

We could not help reflect how much better off these happy villagers were than the tenement dwellers of Bombay—or those who sleep on Bombay's sidewalks. Or those in the ghettos of New York, or Chicago, or Los Angeles.

The city is man's crowning achievement. "God made the country," said the poet, "but man made the town." And man's crowning achievement, more and more, looks like his crowning folly. Rotting, stinking, overcrowded, the large cities of the world have become ungovernable.

The ghetto dweller also sees the essential moments of life and death in stark reality. But he sees them with the eye of the hunter or the hunted; he has no fire beside which to warm himself, no stars to look up at.

How can you affirm life from the ghetto? But that was just what the primitives were teaching us: the affirmation of life. It was a restatement of the ancient words of Scripture: "It is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to *enjoy* the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life" (Ecclesiastes 5:18).

There was a third lesson from the primitives. It cried out to us from every aspect of their lives—in the wedding rituals, in the sacred objects of the home, in the numerous shrines and deities around the Warli hamlets.

The Warlis are deeply religious. For them the natural is intertwined inexorably with the supernatural. They are born in their religion, live in it, die in it. It gives meaning to their existence.

We might have laughed at their crude conceptions of deity; we might have mocked their superstitions. But we did not, for we knew that by their devotion they were reaffirming man's basic need of God.

And perhaps that was the most important lesson from the primitives. Beyond the loss of self, beyond the loss of the joy of life, is the tragedy of "civilized" man's loss of a sense of God in his life.

WILLIAM G. JOHNSON