

Pan and the panic of predators, great and small



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

This spring, where we live here in the mountains, we're wondering: where are the bears? Are they self-isolating along with those other mammals who aren't used to hibernating this time of year – us? I'm afraid our local resident bruins are gone, either looking for food elsewhere or Pan-forbid, killed by hunters or cars. I trust they're "sleeping in" or on the move.

It may be surprising that I invoke the name of Pan. I've been reading up a little on this ancient god and find him fascinating for our time. Sources tell us the god Pan was one of the oldest Greek gods "associated with nature, wooded areas and pasturelands, from which his name is derived. The worship of Pan began in rustic areas far from the populated city centers, and therefore, he did not have large temples built to worship him. [Worship] of Pan centered in nature, often in caves or grottos. Pan ruled over shepherds, hunters and rustic music ... Pan was often in the company of the wood nymphs and other deities of the forest" (greekgodsandgoddesses.net).

Pan is the half-goat, half-human deity often depicted playing the "pan-pipes." As the story is told, Pan was searching for a wood nymph who transformed into a reed in the river. Pan cuts reeds and blows wind through them, searching for his love. Pan represents a playful but powerful personification of the Wild – "a symbol of the force of nature ... a figure representing

the ancient mystery of the forest, hunting activities and wildlife ... depicted as energetic, sometimes frightening, with the wild, unbridled creative force of nature that makes him an interesting, and often entertaining, character" (op.cit.).

In our time of worldwide "pandemic," I find the Greek word "pan" intriguing. Of course, in pan-demic a different use of pan is at play: "pan": all, everything + "demos": people – all in the people (All in the Family?). Not such a great way to bring us all together, is it? Yet, maybe there's a correlation with Pan since the divine name relates to nature and the natural universe – the All. So, perhaps we could think of a pandemic as a bit of Pan in all of us?

We're also in a time of panic – responding with fear. "Panic" apparently comes from a story of battle where "Pan helps his friend survive a vicious struggle by letting out an immense cry that frightened the enemy and caused him to run away. From this story, we get the word 'panic,' the sudden, uncontrollable fear that leads people into irrational behavior" (op.cit.).

Our Pagan friends can no doubt tell us much more about the piper of the woods. As I ponder on Pan, I've been reflecting on predators (predator: preys on another). I frame the picture of predators in this way:

In the Great (scary) Outdoors, we fear the large predators: bears, mountain lions, wolves, sharks.

We kill most of them (fear likes to kill things). Further down the biological trail of life (or death) we fear smaller predators: snakes, scorpions, spiders, ticks, wasps. We try to kill most of them too. Now, as we know (when we actually think about it), not all of these are "predators" (at least toward humans); they don't

intend to harm us. It's usually when We frighten Them that they attack to defend or protect themselves. Yet, they become "monsters" to us – something to kill.

Then, as we descend into the smallest realms of life, we find that we fear the smallest predators: viruses, bacteria, cancer cells, etc. This is where we are now. I know people who are "battling" cancer even as they "battle" the fear of contracting a virus. And what about all those who have the flu virus right now? Could they get both viruses at once? Medical professionals can enlighten us on that scary prospect.

So, we seem to have a "predator problem." Though we are, of course, the most dangerous predators on the planet, who threaten every living thing – we have the power to kill Pan himself. We "unleashed" an even smaller predator when we split atomic particles. Puts things in perspective, doesn't it?

How will this all "pan" out? Will it lead to "pandemonium"? There's another interesting word: pan + demon – inner power. Pandemonium means "wild and noisy disorder or confusion." Wild power all stirred up and out of control. Are you feeling any of that now?

We don't need to panic or be thrown into pandemonium. There is a predator roaming the world right now. It's not an evil demon. It doesn't mean us harm, but potentially kills. As with all predators, this one is powerful, yet also seems to be teaching us something about ourselves.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.