

PRIDE AND LAUGHTER

Robert Pack

You ask why I'm a primatologist;
well, humans are just creatures, too, special
only in that we know ourselves as such.
At our research compound, which simulates
their native habitat in Africa,
we study chimpanzees in social groups.

My young wife, carrying our infant son,
his face squinched up into a round-eyed stare,
joined me to watch the romping chimpanzees
at raucous play: to our astonishment,
Mimi, who recently had given birth,
came to the fence and held her infant up
in ostentatious, proud display before
my beaming wife as if proclaiming that
"Our mother bond transcends our differences."

I felt left out, for what, indeed, had I
to boast about of such significance?
But serendipity prevailed that day.
Coco, an adolescent male, had watched
these mothers showing off, and secretly
he filled his mouth with water and approached
the chain-link fence where we still stood, a look
of somber import in his steady eyes;
he leaned as close to me as he could get,
drew in a mighty breath through his wide nose,
then squirted the held water in my face.

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He paused to guess what my response would be,
and when I showed not anger but surprise,
he rolled upon his back, kicking his legs,
and started the pant laugh that chimpanzees
are famous for. Laughter is contagious,
as you well know, and so my laughing made
him laugh the harder and soon both of us
were uncontrolled hysterical, bonded
by our shared understanding of his joke.

We males had found our own identity—
a little trivial, perhaps, compared
to sacred motherhood, but not to be dismissed
within the universal scheme of things—
or so says science in its pause from what
we humans are, in search of dignity,
what we can honorably do between
our making babies and just having fun.