While cutting back the withered yellow raspberry canes, I felt as if I was being watched. Not the lurking stranger danger watched. More like mother-in-law watched as you clean her son’s house. The you-better-not-mess-this-up kind of watched. I instinctively reviewed any possible wrong ways in which dead stalks could be removed, and the ramifications to continued familial harmony from doing so.

I work in the garden as a respite from thinking, a time to pull the plug, remove the backup battery, click the red X to stop the constant pop-ups of the often inappropriately timed and themed random visualizations, musical swatches, descriptive phrases, scraps of depressing news stories, or half-remembered conversations that clutter my mind and keep me from the crucially important adult goals I am supposed to be pursuing in my middle years, like a job, any job with health insurance. Thinking gets me into trouble. Gardening is a time to just do. Don’t think, just do.

As I shook off the self lecture, and aimed my clippers at the next yellowed cane, he swiveled his corn kernel sized head, a tiny yield sign with two pinpoint pupiled ping-pong ball eyes and locked me in his gaze. The praying mantis is no ordinary mid-sized, middle of the road, Midwestern bug. He’s big. He’s so big that you can see his feet. They have serrated edges like side mounted toes and are proportioned to the mantis as basketball shoes are to a thirteen-year-old boy. At two to five inches long and bright green, with an awkwardly long abdomen, gangly legs, folding dragonfly wings, and two impressive spiny forelegs, which it holds like a pair of praying hands, the mantis does not look like he is from around here and indeed he isn’t.

This praying mantis is, like most of us in this country, descended from immigrants, sent here for work purposes. His ancestors are Chinese mercenaries who arrived around 1896 as “beneficial insects”, a polite way of saying that they were sent to devour those regarded as undesirable. His diet includes caterpillars, bees, wasps, and that universally annoying more oatmeal than opiate of the insect masses, flies. As in all societies, progress comes with a price. In the case of the praying mantis, that price is beauty. The butterfly is also on the menu and hunger doesn’t discriminate, but, like most of us, the mantis lives a largely useful life. He is a contributor to our society.

So am I, but the mantis has only a single season to make his contribution, to capture and eat enough pesis, without himself being eaten, to survive to adulthood and create the next generation of mantises to carry on the good work. I have how many years allotted to achieve the same end; to hatch, eat, mate, lay eggs, and die? It’s obviously all more complicated than that but I can’t help wonder why, now that my young are raised to reproducing age, nature’s ultimate purpose for all organisms, I have all of this time left? And worse, what am I doing with that time? What would the mantis do with a
I'm pretty sure he wouldn't spend his evenings comparing benefits and premiums for the various policies offered by the Mantis Life and Casualty Company, LLC. I doubt that he would lie awake in the middle of the night wondering if he should swallow his pride and apply for that job at Fly Mart because hunting in my garden hasn't been too productive lately. Would he worry about tuition payments for the offspring he didn't eat? Or would it be easier to just eat the rest of them now and maybe buy a boat? Oh why didn't he eat them sooner? Then he wouldn't have all these problems.

I like to think the mantis, with his much smaller brain, would not do what so many of us do, what I do most days. I envy the just-the-basics life of the bug that's watching me. We are both at work. For him, the work is necessary for life. For me, the work is because hunting in my garden hasn't been too productive lately. Would he worry about tuition payments for the offspring he didn't eat? Or would it be easier to just eat the rest of them now and maybe buy a boat? Oh why didn't he eat them sooner? Then he wouldn't have all these problems.

His world is a physically violent one, from infancy to mating, which often ends in death for the male. Parents cannibalize their offspring, and siblings are an early food source for each other. The male often literally loses his head to the female during mating, but has been observed still continuing to mate even after his head and brain have been eaten, a true testament to the power of the urge to reproduce. Our immediate human world, (war, street, and domestic violence not withstanding) is more of an emotionally rather than physically violent place, where courtship, mating, and family are concerned. Perhaps this is another product of our longer lifespan. We have more time and we can kill more slowly, with words, or lack of attention, or a look, whether the victim is offspring, sibling, competitor, or mate. In the visually and verbally competitive mating world of humans, competition is also violent. We are equal opportunity killers. Either mate of the species may indulge in the figurative biting off of the other's head and that act may be repetitive with any mating pair. Like the mantis, mating may continue between the pair even after the biting off of the head, so strong is the urge to reproduce.

The difference to me is that the mantis way is both simpler and more effective. The female mantis exudes pheromones from her body to attract the male. If a male is in the area the success rate is high. Both male and female humans purchase a variety of scents to mask their natural ones, also, according to the makers of scented products, to attract a mate, or at least to not offend a potential one. Did our natural body scents stop working as an attractant at some point in our history? Or did marketing companies plant the seeds of another worry in our heads to compete for the luxurious surplus of mental space that is standard equipment in our make and model?

While most of our worries and concerns can be traced back to basic life needs much the same as the those of the mantis; food, shelter, and an environment in which to raise our young, how did we fall prey to feeling that way? While I don't want to see the mating, I also don't want him to see me poring over pages of checking account drawing lines with three colors of highlighter and excess cash money from two decades of the company.

Years after my head has been bitten off, I think about anything but the basics in our culture. The mantis will die with a mouthful of money from two decades of the company, and I can barely remember what it was I was doing. I turn back to the raspberries, spent my June bumper crop, leaves turned to beetles in July. Those battered canes recuperate in time to produce a second crop to cut them down eventually to ensure the mantis needs quiet camouflage from me. Neither of us can make the decision whether they have two, four, or six legs. Sexes are a fact of life. I know I can’t think about anything but the basics in our culture, (war, street, and domestic violence not withstanding) is more of an emotionally rather than physically violent place, where courtship, mating, and family are concerned. Perhaps this is another product of our longer lifespan. We have more time and we can kill more slowly, with words, or lack of attention, or a look, whether the victim is offspring, sibling, competitor, or mate. In the visually and verbally competitive mating world of humans, competition is also violent. We are equal opportunity killers. Either mate of the species may indulge in the figurative biting off of the other's head and that act may be repetitive with any mating pair. Like the mantis, mating may continue between the pair even after the biting off of the head, so strong is the urge to reproduce.

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ronment in which to raise our young to maturity and perpetuate the species,
how did we fall prey to feeling that we need more than those things in order
to live? While I don’t want to see the mantis in my garden beheaded during
mating, I also don’t want him to see me spending a beautiful fall afternoon
poring over pages of checking account registers from the past five years
drawing lines with three colors of highlighters to categorize where all the
money from two decades of the commerce that is mating in my world went.

Years after my head has been bitten off, I still go through the motions.
The colorful paperwork draws me bee-like into a cash scented rose. The
whirr of the adding machine totaling necessary and unnecessary echoes
cricket legs calling to other cricket legs, start over, start over, grow a new head
and start over.

So what do I do with the new head I’ve grown today? I don’t want to
think about anything but the basics but it’s hard to know what the basics are
in our culture. The mantis will die when the weather turns colder. I will have
to pay for heat. The mantis can fly and does not range far during his lifetime.
I range up to 150 miles from home for work and need a car. I need my house
and my house needs work and I’m told I need health insurance, yet millions
of people are living without it, filling up their extra allotted life span, without
any guarantees of future anything. There are so many choices, so many flying
words, so many things being peddled as necessities in the two legged world,
that I can barely remember what it was that I once wanted to do with my un­
naturally extended life, my post-mating time in the garden.

I turn back to the raspberries, spent from their efforts to produce the
June bumper crop, leaves turned to lace by the annual squadron of Japanese
beetles in July. Those battered canes
that have not succumbed struggle to
recuperate in time to produce a second crop before the killing frost. I’ll have
to cut them down eventually to ensure a healthy crop next year. But for now
the mantis needs quiet camouflage from his predators as much as I need it
from mine. Neither of us can make them go away. We learn to accept them
whether they have two, four, or six legs, or they silently creep into our con­
sciousness through the leaky January windows of our senses only to crash
around like birds fallen down the chimney into a parlor full of knick-knacks.
They are a fact of life. I know I can’t, as much as I often want to, grind the
thought mill to a halt. There is no real control over what I pack today’s head
with, but I can temporarily rechart the flight of my thoughts by changing my
surroundings; by being open to accidental discovery, by allowing myself time
to be available to the possibility of the mantis.

After a male mantis is killed by the female during mating, she consumes
his torso and legs. She leaves only the wings untouched.