



## ESSAY



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# Naked Soul

by Jeffrey Lockwood

**I**n a course I took once on comparative religions, I learned that the Jains renounce shoes (some even go naked) to avoid harming other living creatures as they walk. This sounded a bit extreme but plausible, given my exotic and romantic images of India. Many years later, I met a Jain who was on the engineering faculty at the University of Wyoming. He was a very soft-spoken and gentle fellow. But he wore shoes. He explained that the strictest form of Jainism was practiced by monks, some of whom also swept the ground in front of them as they made their way from village to village so as to further diminish the chances

of crushing insects or spiders. I didn't challenge his explanation, but I'm not so sure about the protective virtues of being barefoot—an ant under a naked heel is not going to fare much better than one under a sandal. The difference would be one's awareness that the ant was underfoot.

Crushing an insect underfoot is a rather intimate act of violence. During our graduate school days in Louisiana, my wife and I shared our mobile home with a community of cockroaches. I'd come home in the evening to find empty yogurt containers inverted on the kitchen floor. My wife could bring herself to smash the half-inch German cockroaches, but the two-

inch Americans and Smoky Browns were another matter. So if she caught one of them making a dash across the floor, she simply trapped the creature, consigned it to death row, and waited for the executioner to arrive. Stepping on these insects yielded a nauseating odor. However, the repulsion was not so much olfactory as it was auditory and tactile. The crunching sound that gave way to a greasy slickness, sensed through the sole of a shoe, was simply unbearable. For my part, I learned how to pin the cockroaches beneath a couple of paper towels and deliver a lethal blow to the head and thorax with just enough pressure to kill. Even this made me queasy, a visceral reaction I managed



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to hide from my wife through some misguided sense of manliness.

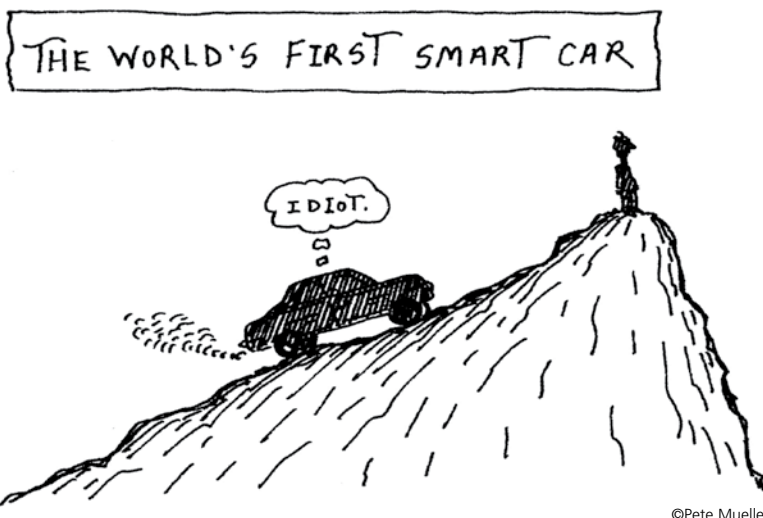
Most invertebrates don't have voices to cry out when they are stepped upon. However, their cuticles, shells, and carapaces audibly express their protests. If we listen very carefully, these grinding pleas may reach our ears and our hearts. What if we could actually hear each life shriek under our feet? Perhaps our sanity depends on being selectively deaf. Maybe the Jain monks can hear these cries, and that is why they walk barefoot and sweep the path. Once one has become even momentarily aware of this world at and beneath our feet, the voices are never completely silenced. When I traverse a prairie site filled with grasshoppers in the course of my work, I do not shed my shoes or sweep the insects ahead of me. But my pace and stride are changed for my experience. I walk more slowly, giving them what seems to be a fair chance to avoid my falling feet. And I tend to shuffle a bit, dragging my toes to provide more disturbance in the grass—a sort of warning that I am coming through.

Arthropods have evolved hard exteriors, in part to protect their vulnerable interiors from the stumbling giants with whom they share the world. Humans have internal skeletons, but then we are rarely crushed—at least physically. We have evolved into social crea-

tures that are increasingly less likely to crush one another's skulls. Sociologists tell us that the murder rate in modern society is lower than at any other time in our history, including our lengthy period as hunter-gatherers. But they've not considered the possibility that humans have simply replaced physical violence with psychological and spiritual violence. Insulting, disdain, shunning, and slandering have largely replaced beatings, but the damage is no less severe. In response, we construct emotional shells to avoid the risks of intimacy—the heartbreak of failed relations, the harsh words of a supervisor, or the cruel judgment of a teacher. Our safe places have shrunk to the abstract confines of our own minds.

As easily as a leather boot crushes a grasshopper on the prairie, thoughtless words can crush the spirit of a person. I can't avoid doing some harm or being hurt; walking barefoot means squashing a few fellow beings and flinching from the occasional thorn. However, I can slow down—at least a little—every so often. Moving at the pace of the naked sole on the prairie doesn't mean stopping, but it surely means causing less harm—to both myself and others. ■

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