**Community in Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Years ago, a baby elephant was born at the Smithsonian’s National Zoo. Since I lived within walking distance of this newborn neighbor, I grew surprisingly attached to him. His antics were recorded on camera to the delight of a cynical city that fell in love with him. It felt, somehow, as though we had all acquired a massive new pet – whose care and keeping was, fortunately, someone else’s responsibility.

Since then, I have had a soft spot in my heart for elephants.

So, it was not surprising that, a few weeks ago, I was drawn to a viral elephant video from the San Diego Zoo. There was a small earthquake and, apparently, elephants can feel earthquakes through the soles of their giant feet. When the elephants of San Diego sensed the earthquake, they gathered together in a huddle, staying as close to each other as they could, with the herd’s smallest elephants at the center of the circle. When the danger passed, they broke ranks and continued going about their day.

It was heartwarming – but it also challenged me to consider whether, in two important ways, we can learn something from elephants.

First, in time of crisis, their instinct was to draw close to each other. They may not have understood what an earthquake is, but they sensed that it was something that could, at the very least, bring harm to them. So, they gathered together to face this impending danger together.

It is in times of crisis, challenge, or danger, that we most need each other, that we most want to rely on each other, and that we most yearn to know that we are not alone. As humans, we know that we are made for community and made to be in relationships with each other. Yet, when life is most challenging, do we let those moments bring us together or tear us apart? Are we friends in fair weather, or are we also shelters in the storms of life? Do we abandon those who most need our help, or with compassion do we share the pains and passions of their lives? It is easy to *know* the answers to these questions. But, when times get difficult, and these answers are not easy to *live,* remembering the community of elephants may help!

Second, and more touchingly, when there was danger, those who were most vulnerable were moved to the center of the circle where they could be most protected. It was not “every elephant for himself.” Rather, the greatest assistance and protection went to the smallest of the elephants who could be more easily harmed.

This is a beautiful reminder of how we should also keep those who are most vulnerable – in so many different ways – at the center of our concern, and not at the distant outskirts of our care. That is not always efficient, easy, or convenient. It can also be contrary to a culture that, all too often, can encourage us to abandon those who are weakest. As those made in God’s image and likeness, maybe we still can learn from elephants.

I do not know enough about elephants to know how much of their actions were pure instinct and how much was conscious decision-making. But, when it comes to humans with free will, we *can* make decisions about how we will treat each other in difficult times – and, in a particular way, whether those who are the most vulnerable will be at the heart of our care.

Years ago, elephant videos charmed and entertained me as I watched the elephant who lived literally down the block from me grew up. But a few weeks ago, new elephant videos caused me to reflect a bit more on the ways in which we live together in community and how we live the bonds that connect us to each other in good times and in bad times.

And, yes, maybe I learned from some elephants how to be part of the communities where I dwell in ordinary time.

*Lucia A. Silecchia is Professor of Law and Associate Dean for Faculty Research at the Catholic University of America’s Columbus School of Law. “On Ordinary Times” is a biweekly column reflecting on the ways to find the sacred in the simple. Email her at* *silecchia@cua.edu**.*