



By Margaret Evans, Editor

So, I need to tell y'all about this French philosopher/anthropologist/literary critic I've been reading lately.

(Wait! Don't turn the page...)

His name is Rene Girard, and he's dead. He shed this mortal coil in 2015. Before that, however, he spent decades developing something called "mimetic theory," which sounds complicated and dull, but is actually easy to grasp - and illuminating! - when explained properly. Seriously, if you come away from this column scratching your head and/or yawning, it will be my fault, not Girard's. (Cold comfort, eh?)

But first, a strategic digression: I'm sitting in my backyard on our new post-Matthew patio, watching a drama unfold. My cat Arthur's been lazing in the tall grass, but now he's up, body stiff and tail flexed, eyes riveted on our bird feeder across the yard. There are no birds at the moment, but beneath the feeder is a shifty-looking squirrel, and I know exactly what he's up to.

Squirrely and I, we've been locked in a battle of wits all summer. Every day, he scopes out my feeders - no matter where I've moved them or what obstacles I've placed in his way - in a wily attempt to breach security and plunder my birdseed. (He usually succeeds, too, blasted little cuss.)

As Squirrely sizes up his challenge *du jour*, twitching and twirling around the base of the feeder,

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oblivious to the looming threat, my tawny tabby begins inching toward him. Arthur moves like a small tiger - slow, stealthy, haunches rolling side to side. He's all focus. A ninja. Suddenly, a leaf cracks under his paw, and Squirrely s up the nearest tree. I imagine a thought bubble over Arthur's head: "Curses! Foiled again." Meanwhile, a couple of chickadees land lightly on the high-hung feeder, safe from both Kung Fu Kitty and Squirrely MacGyver. I exhale and get back to my writing.

These Mutual of Omaha moments happen in my yard every day - just like yours - bringing me a strange, primal comfort. I always know what these creatures will do. How they will behave. The cat, the squirrel, the birds and butterflies and bees - they're all blessedly predictable. All acting on animal instinct.

We humans often act on instinct, too, but according to Rene Girard (the dead French guy, remember?), we have a little something extra. Something that makes life both delicious and hellish. He calls it "desire," and here's how it works:

*"Humankind is that creature who lost a part of its animal instinct in order to gain access to 'desire'
...
Once their natural needs are satisfied,
, humans desire intensely
, but they don't know exactly what they desire
, for no instinct guides them. We do not each have our own desire, one really our own . . . Truly to desire, we must have recourse to people about us; we have to borrow their desires . . . It is not only desire that one borrows from those whom one takes for models; it is a mass of behaviors, attitudes, things learned, prejudices, preferences, etc . . . If the desire of children were not mimetic, if they did not of necessity choose for models the human beings who surround them, humanity would have neither language nor culture. -
Rene Girard,
I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*

Got that? Okay, maybe it's a little more complicated than I let on, but the bottom line with

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Girard is this: We humans have been imitating each other from Day One - or, at least since we were recognizably "human" - and that's how culture is created. As soon as our primitive selves figured out how to satisfy our animal "needs," we started looking around for things to "want" or "desire," and that's when we started imitating each other.

According to Girard, this imitation of desire - this wanting what others want - typically results in something called mimetic rivalry, which often leads to violence. Sometimes that violence is merely verbal or psychological but not always. Once you understand mimetic rivalry, you can see how the pattern has repeated throughout history, and you even start seeing it in the world around you - on levels both great and small. Mimetic rivalry happens in your home, in your work place, and - glaringly - on social media. It even happens on the world stage, where the "good guys" often respond to the "bad guys" with the very violence they seek to redress, thus, ironically, perpetuating the cycle. It recently happened in Charlottesville, where people protesting white supremacists began mirroring their behavior, thus blurring the line between good and evil.

Girard uses the fancy word "mimesis" instead of "imitation" because the terms have slightly different connotations. While imitation is typically intentional, mimesis is something we do unconsciously. Something deeply imbedded in the human psyche. But here's the beautiful thing: Once we know we're doing it, we can choose *not* to. We can "opt out" of mimetic rivalry by choosing *not* to imitate our rivals. Or, more specifically, we can choose a different model to imitate. Through his research, Girard came to believe that the perfect or "divine" model is Jesus Christ, whose instruction to "turn the other cheek" - and many others like it - Girard found not only revelatory, but revolutionary . . . and critical to the survival of the human race.

"To escape responsibility for violence we imagine it is enough to pledge never to be the first to do violence," wrote Girard in his book *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*. "But no one ever sees himself as casting the first stone. Even the most violent persons believe that they are always reacting to a violence committed in the first instance by someone else . . . In a truly global world, the renunciation of violent reprisal is bound to become, in a more and more obvious way, the indispensable condition of our survival."

You don't have to profess Christianity though Girard eventually did - to recognize the wisdom in that statement, or the prophetic nature of Girard's mimetic theory. All you have to do is pay attention.

We live in a world that's plum "set up" with mimetic rivalry. Hell-bent on eye-for-an-eyeing, tit-for-tatting, repaying evil-for-evil . . . It's a world where talking heads shout each other down on our TV screens, Facebook "friends" sling hate back and forth across

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our computer screens, ever-multiplying "identity groups" vie for power - placing ever-escalating demands on each other - and even church congregations split over irreconcilable differences, competing for the title of "real Christianity."

(And let's not forget those husbands and wives in kitchens all over the land, arguing about whose turn it is to take out the trash.)

We are not like the wild things in my backyard, driven solely by animal instinct. We are human creatures, mimetic in nature, and we need models to imitate. There are plenty of good models out there - people who have learned to "opt out" of the cycle that leads to violence - but they are often so quiet, so gentle, they don't draw our attention in this noisy, flashy, garish global community we've created.

But if we seek them, we find them. And once we do, we wonder how we ever lived without them.

Or how the world will ever survive without more of them.