



THE MYCO-DARWIN AWARDS

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For years I have perseverated over who gets poisoned by mushrooms and why. Victims can be readily classified into three groups: the Vulnerable, the Reckless and the Dumb.

Statistics reflect that the largest group is the Vulnerable, a well described assortment of children, especially toddlers; the elderly; pets (usually dogs, since they are promiscuous omnivores); and immigrants. There has been a tacit assumption in the media and the mycological community that many of the poisonings due to mushrooms are the result of misidentification. Indeed,

news headlines invariably begin with a declaration that the victim mistook a highly toxic mushroom for some common edible. That is usually followed by “even experts cannot tell them apart” and a dire warning not to dabble in the dangerous world of mycophagy. Within the ranks of the more knowing mycological coterie, this idea of misidentification persists. We teach classes to beginners about toxic look-alikes for edible mushrooms and we always ask the victim what they thought they were picking. But a careful analysis of each case reveals a much more interesting and complex dynamic.

The Vulnerable group is well chronicled and provoke little debate.

After-all, toddlers are designed to transfer everything from the ground to their mouths; and immigrants can be readily forgiven when they transfer their mycophilia to their adopted home, little realizing what dangers lurk underfoot. Rather, we will focus on the Reckless and the Dumb, both being candidates for the myco-Darwin awards. Many don't succumb before they reproduce, suggesting that their numbers might grow, a clear affront to standard Darwinian dogma.

I have become increasingly impressed by a large segment of the population who are romantically naive about the natural world. They see themselves at the center of the universe surrounded by a benign and nurturing Mother Earth; as if all things around them are there for their beneficence and well being. They have the ultimate anthropomorphic view of mankind. Their naivete is compounded by medieval thinking reminiscent of the

Doctrine of Signatures, a commonplace belief during the Dark Ages. This idea, still favored by some herbalists, suggests that if a plant looks like something, then it must be good for it. To this day some common plant names bear the scars of this idea—liverwort, wormwood and the like. At the recent fungal fair in Santa Cruz, a young pregnant woman was standing near a group of *Russula* and *Lactarius*. She read the cards in the display, turned to a society member and asked, “I see that these mushrooms have milk. Do you think if I licked one, it will help me breast feed my baby?” As crazy as this might seem, it is no different from those who think that stinkhorns are aphrodisiacs because they look like erections, and all other manner of what in vernacular Yiddish would be termed cockamamie ideas. Perhaps the Ages of Enlightenment and Reason never arrived in some quarters. With such primitive notions it is no surprise that certain people are willing to succumb to any weird temptation.

Such fuzzy logic, if it can be termed such, is not confined to mushrooms. I was recently informed of a vegetarian defending his dietary choice by claiming that since elephants are vegetarian and the largest mammals, ergo it must be the optimal approach for mankind. He was a little taken aback to learn that whales are larger and feed largely on krill, a decidedly animal product, and that he himself lacked both a trunk and an elephant's digestive system. Even so, it is often difficult to overcome blind faith and an entrenched belief. Moreover, as a pachyderm, nothing was going to get beneath his skin.

Gary Lincoff, author of the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms* and *The Complete Mushroom Hunter: An Illustrated Guide to Finding, Harvesting, and Enjoying Wild Mushrooms*, noted recently that one can divide the world into two broad groups—those who will eat anything that is not demonstrably toxic, and the rest who won't eat anything that is not proven to be completely safe. It is the former who are the willing experimenters in the Russian roulette of mycophagy and life in general. They take chances with gay abandon. I recall a foray at Priest Lake, Idaho where I shared a cabin with a group from North Carolina. They were determined to sample every mushroom

they picked. Each evening, after imbibing a brew or two, we gathered around the range with a large fry pan which they mentally subdivided into six or eight pie shaped slices, sautéing a number of different mushrooms in each segment. Despite my protestations, and their inability to identify the majority of the specimens, they not only ate dozens of species, but survived a prodigious intake of alcohol. We should be grateful to this group in general, because they are willing to extend our culinary horizons, even if it means the occasional self-sacrifice. These are the folks who help to dispel myths and push back the forces of darkness.

Next to the naive and the reckless are those who avoid acquaintance with any vestige of reason. A very well-known mycologist visited a man in the hospital who was recovering from poisoning and asked him why he had eaten a mushroom that the mycologist's excellent text had labelled as poisonous.

"Because I thought that your book was wrong," was his response. That is reminiscent of Mark Twain's observation that "one should never read a health book. One may die of a misprint."

Carelessness and stupidity are not necessarily related to IQ, although it is true that 50% of humanity have IQ's below 100. How someone as smart as the author of the Horse Whisperer could mistake a Cortinarius for any other common edible mushroom remains a mystery. Some accounts suggest that they were looking for boletes, others that it was chanterelles they were pursuing. Neither resemble Cortinarius beyond being a mushroom. And this occurred in a country where its people are revered for their mycophobia.

The time has come to celebrate these errors in judgment. An annual myco-Darwin prize has been established and will be awarded each year to the individual, who in the opinion of the judges shows the most egregious lack of

perspicacity. Sheer stupidity will garner additional bonus points. The subjects need not necessarily be deceased, nor will the seriousness of the poisoning be considered in the scoring. All that is required is the presence of some symptom following the ingestion of mushrooms.

Please submit your story, with all the gory details to Denis R. Benjamin. Applications from Benjamin family members and previous winners will not be accepted. E-mails must be received by December 31st each year and the award will be announced on April 1.

E-mail applications should be sent to drbenjamin2003@yahoo.com. For those who still remember cursive writing, they are encouraged to use snail mail to Denis Benjamin, PO Box 399, Cle Elum WA 98922.

Dr. Benjamin is the author of *Mushrooms: Poisons and Panaceas—a handbook for naturalists mycologists, and physicians* (Freeman & Co., 1995). ♣



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PUBLISHER'S NOTES: Although many wild mushrooms are quite palatable, some are deadly poisonous. It is advisable to avoid eating any wild organisms, including fungi, unless absolutely certain of identification. And although some mushroom species are edible for many people, those same species may cause allergic reactions or illness in others. When in doubt, throw it out. FUNGI wants to ensure that all readers are long-term subscribers. It is a good idea to have any wild mushroom checked by an expert before eating them. It should be understood that the Publisher and all Editors are not responsible for any consequences of ingesting wild mushrooms. Furthermore, the Publisher and all Editors are not engaged, herein, in the rendering of any medical advice or services. All readers should verify all information and data before administering any drug, therapy, or treatment discussed herein. Neither the Editors nor the Publisher accepts any responsibility for the accuracy of the information or consequences from the use or misuse of the information contained herein. Unauthorized reproduction of published content of FUNGI is strictly forbidden, and permission for reproduction must be obtained by application in writing to the Publisher.

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