

Recently a 14-year-old male chimpanzee named Travis was shot to death after violently attacking a long-standing human friend. The victim, a woman in her 50s, suffered significant injury to her face, the mutilation of both hands and quite possibly permanent brain damage.

This of course was not the first chimp attack on record, and given that hundreds of chimps remain as “pets” in the United States, it certainly will not be the last. The buzz question by the media in this event centers around provocation of the attack. Perhaps it was due to the chimp having Lyme Disease; or the fact he was given Xanax to calm notable agitation earlier in the day; the victim presented herself on the property in a foreign car with a new hair style which may have led the chimp to protect his owner from the “stranger.”

As in most unpredicted violent attacks, whether by animal or human, motivation remains a mystery.

I have a particular fondness for chimpanzees; afterall, I was blessed with the opportunity to spend a summer using American Sign Language to communicate with five signing chimps. I witnessed chimpanzees completing simple sentences when referencing an object or asking for a particular toy or treat. I had to turn down the mother chimp, Washoe, when she requested I give her a blanket at bedtime, as doing so would have put me in the “reach zone” from the cage. I played a game of chase with Dar, talked about my clothes with Tatu, and was asked to share my earrings with Moja.

In each case, the chimp’s emotional expression was clear. The face would appear puzzled when they would ask a question; frustrated when you asked “what” too many times; angry when you cheated; and happy when they openly giggled during a game. It would seem that emotional states are expressed similarly on the face of both human and chimpanzee. The exception is the display of the teeth, which in chimp language is a sign of aggression.

From the human perspective, the similarities between chimp and human are incredible. As humans, we are utterly amazing. We have relationships, communicate in written and verbal language, have a certain set of sounds that, put together, create words to which we give meaning. We build bridges, treat cancer, clone sheep. We are very, very special.

Chimpanzees, to our utter amazement, have eyes that mirror our own. Body posture and expressions are so similar to ours that an assumption of their feelings at different moments can be made, with impressive accuracy. We are moved by the love that is apparent between a mother and her baby, the friendships that are witnessed among the adult females and the rebellious behaviors of the adolescent males. It is no wonder humans and chimpanzees share approximately 94.6 percent identical DNA.

A 2007 study demonstrated chimpanzees, like humans, do not take kindly to being cheated by their fellow neighbor. Given the opportunity to retaliate, a chimp will “even the score” with his perpetrator. Thus a chimpanzee, when victimized, will punish the offender harshly.

Interestingly chimps can distinguish intentional victimization from that of accidental consequence. When a chimp steals from another chimp, the reaction from the victim is out-n-out rage. When angry, the chimp is motivated to punish the thief with a vengeance.

Much like the design of our judicial system, chimps use punishment to keep order in their communities. Sentencing is immediate and severe enough that social rules are strictly followed. None of this repeat offending, third strike your out law, or lawyer assignment for case defense. A thief is a thief. Imagine the money they save in court costs.

The similarities between chimpanzees and humans often leads to idealistic thinking about sharing a deep and powerful relationship with them. The owner of Travis took pride in sharing a glass of wine with him in the evenings, showering together and sleeping in the same bed. I’m a

believer in cultural diversity acceptance, but this relationship seemed to fall outside the definition of healthy. For all the similarities between these two species, distinct differences undoubtedly exist.

First of all, chimpanzees are social creatures that have no qualms about “taking matters into their own hands.” Social behavior is set forth by the alpha leaders. There is a hierarchy of power that if disrespected, results in violent and often deadly consequences. Status within the group is determined by physical strength, intelligence and the ability to manipulate subordinates into compliance.

Alpha leaders earn their status by first asserting their dominance, followed by continual defense of such status through challenges by others interested in moving up the corporate ladder.

Now imagine the alpha leader in a human/chimp duo. Humans may have the advantage in the area of prefrontal cortex size, thus allowing them to create inescapable cages for their running mate, but chimps definitely take center ring when it comes to physical strength. I recall a story of one of the signing chimps holding a man in place, through the bars, by using one finger pressed down on the man’s shoe. This man attempted escape for over an hour.

An average adult male chimpanzee has five times the strength of the strongest man alive! Not much for competition huh? Thus when a woman removes the advantage of having a prefrontal cortex for defense by allowing a chimp to free roam, having access to the family car for driving purposes and tolerance for the chimp drinking under the legal age limit, the chimp is immediately in the position of alpha leader. Like everybody, alpha leaders have bad days too.

It would seem reasonable the question the media should ask is not what motivated the chimp to attack and mutilate a visitor, but why a human, the world’s most intelligent species to date, would willingly lay down the only card in her hand that gave her a chance at winning her brain.