

ONE



## Confronting the Army: Defending the Homefront

**M**arching in single file, the army moves in an orderly fashion. West bounders advance on the right, east bounders pass on the left. Chin in one hand and coffee mug in the other, I sit admiring their coordination and commitment to duty. The troops traverse the kitchen along a trajectory high on the wall, just below the ceiling, then make a hard left at the corner to intercept the trash enclosure below. So long as the army limits its conquests to the waste containers in the closet, I am content to leave them to their operation.

“Watch your step!” The reprimand still echoes in my ears. I was about nine when we visited my Dad’s Navy

buddy, Ernie, on the reservation. We had just gotten out of the car in front of his house, after hours and hours on the road. My heart stopped, mortified to be called out by a grown-up I had just met, especially when I had no idea what I had done wrong. I stared at my feet, desperate to figure out what harm they threatened. “Ants are sacred to our people,” Ernie explained with a hand on my shoulder and a gentle demeanor.

Ants? I hadn’t even noticed them, much less extended them any reverence. I’d never heard an adult speak of a bug as anything but a filthy pest. What could this man wearing blue jeans, a cowboy hat, and weather-worn face be talking about? He looked nothing like the Indians in my history books. His home looked like something down the street in our Midwestern subdivision back home, except for the lack of turf grass—and the miles between it and anything else. My out-of-its-element mind strained to navigate this strange territory.

Ernie pointed to a tiny procession streaming across the bare earth. “Walk around them this way,” as he stepped over the parade. I followed, taking a giant step, just in case. I kept my eyes glued to the ground all the way to the front door, watching out for other critters that might warrant a newfound consideration.

I’ve never looked at any bug in quite the same way since that brief encounter with Ernie. His few words and kind countenance belied an innate wisdom, which seemed both entirely foreign and vaguely familiar. Ernie’s reverence for ones so small sprung open a lock on my heart. I’ve been walking around the ants, as best I can, ever since.

A line was crossed today, however, when I opened the refrigerator and discovered a few casualties in the water pitcher. Undeterred by the tight seal around the refrigerator door, a platoon managed to breach the blockade. As tempting as this boon of wet refreshment must be in this extended drought, this infiltration irritates my inner mama bear. Much as I intend to respect all life, the well-being of my family, including the sanctity of their food and water supply, is my utmost priority. I can no longer ignore the collision of our worlds.

My husband has been asking me to call the exterminator for days. I haven't done it, even though I know who to call. We used to have the perimeter of our home sprayed quarterly back when the kids were babies, and I lived in fierce mama bear mode. I ended the spraying after the kitchen remodel, which sealed up their old points of entry. Or so I thought. The intensity of the recent heat wave has driven the thirsty troops to scout out a new one.

Still, I see Ernie's face when I think about issuing the order to disperse or die. I decide to turn the matter over to a higher power: my pal Googlia. That's the name I've given my Google Assistant (why doesn't she have a cool name like Cortana and Siri?) because she cooks up some good stuff.

Ants, she tells me, turn over more soil than earthworms, disperse plant seeds, and feed on the eggs of other pests like house flies, fleas, and silverfish. If left to patrol a perimeter around a house, they can also deter termites. Rising from the desk, I bow to the army. At this point, I feel I should be paying them, not spraying them. I can't bear to order the annihilation of an army of ecosystem engineers. So, what are my options?

I could issue an order to retreat. On the advice of my critter-kind friend, Kirsten, I once wrote a note to a gopher whose exuberance for tunneling was destroying our newly-planted tree. I penned a plea for him to find a new place to live, using block letters and simple words, as if this would aid the gopher's comprehension. Tucked the note down his hole very late one moonless night, along with a whispered prayer, then scurried back into the house before alarming the neighborhood watch.

The gopher left, and the tree survived. Whether it was my note or just this gopher's time to go, I can't say. I do know that, a few months later, a gopher nosed out of the ground right next to me where I sat on a blanket in a public garden. Each of us was as startled as the other. "What? You? Here? Seriously?" I like to think gopher was telling me he found a great new place to live. But then, I also like to think that my partaking of Chardonnay is medicinal.

Given that this ant platoon numbers in the hundreds or thousands, a letter-writing campaign seems a challenge at best. The troops receive their marching orders from a higher command than mine.

Maybe I could leave a bowl of water for them outside, so they won't need to come inside to slake their thirst. No idea how to locate their outdoor colony, though, seeing as how they are entering the kitchen through the eyes of an electrical outlet. The water bowl notion also strikes me as so much anthropocentric arrogance, expecting the critters of the world to depend on human handouts to survive.

A voice in my head, the one I am just beginning to give quarter, whispers that these ants are my teachers. They are here to instruct me and will retreat of their own accord,

once their mission is accomplished. Or maybe that's so much wishful thinking.

I turn to author Ted Andrews, a shamanic teacher for whom this kind of whispered intelligence is normal. Ants teach us about work and industry and patience, he says in *Animal Speak*. "Ask yourself if you are disciplining yourself enough to accomplish the tasks at hand?"<sup>2</sup> Though Discipline and I are rarely on speaking terms, I've been accomplishing plenty lately, thank you very much.

"Are you being patient with your efforts?" Andrews asks further. I snicker. Then I laugh so hard I have to put down the book before it drops to smash my bare toes. If Discipline and I are chilly acquaintances, Patience is locked out of the house, knees knocking in an Arctic chill. Sigh.

Turning back to address the troops, I wave the white flag. "I surrender. I will practice patience. I can't say that I'll pick it up right away, but it's time to give the old meditation practice a reboot. Message received. Now please relocate your troops outside my kitchen." Closing my eyes, I force myself to stand still for an entire 4.5 minutes as a demonstration of my good intentions.

When I peek out of lowered lids, I can discern no impact of my vow on the soldiers who continue to march. Maybe it's because I haven't given them enough time. I'm still new at this patience thing, but the food situation will not wait for me to develop it. Out of options, I determine to employ a deterrent as painless as possible.

---

2 Ted Andrews, *Animal Speak: The Magical Powers of Creatures Great and Small* (Woodbury, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 1993), 336.

Googlia tells me that cinnamon oil is a natural ant repellent. Well, love Earth. I have a stockpile of cinnamon oil left over from our Blissful Soul store. Spraying cinnamon oil is something I can do in a minute—five, if you count the time required to dig through the crowded cabinet to search for it.

I pour the cinnamon oil and some water into a spray bottle, then turn to confront the army. I hear Ernie's voice in my ear, so I breathe a word of gratitude for the contribution of ants in the world. I bless their devotion to the mission, as I ask them to vacate our kitchen. I swear I feel Ernie pat me on the shoulder. And then I spray.

## Love Earth Invitation

Sit quietly for a moment and receive three deep breaths. Allow your imagination to fill with an image of ants. What are they doing? Are they working in cooperation? Or do you see a solitary ant, frantic to find its way back to the colony? Do you envision the queen being serviced by the winged males? Or is your image of ants more like the cartoon images of ants who talk and behave like humans? Or are you just squirming and itching?

Ask for guidance with any current challenges from the ants. If talking to ants seems absurd (and I completely understand this), consider asking your guides, your angels, or your own higher power for any words of wisdom for you about ants, pests, work, industry, patience, or anything else. Speak your questions aloud, if you are willing. Consider stating any your level of willingness to receiving responses from unexpected sources.

Listen as you continue to breathe. If you experience any resistance to this silly exercise, notice it as you might watch waves crashing on the beach. *Here comes another wave. How interesting.*

Know that responses to these types of inquiries may not come in words. Give attention to any images, feelings, aromas, or even silence. If you don't sense any right now, give your subconscious a command to share what it has learned in the dreamtime or in another quiet moment.

Close this experience as you feel moved, perhaps with a blessing or a word of gratitude.