

When Creation Stinks

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WE Christians love to sing about creation's beauty, but sometimes nature can be strange. How to explain the platypus, which looks like it was made from spare parts, or the scary anglerfish, which "fishes" for its prey by dangling a luminescent lure within striking distance of its jaws? When I'm tempted to limit God's imagination, I remember the cuttlefish, whose skin can flash patterns like a neon sign one instant and then go dull to blend into a rocky reef.

These examples exist everywhere, even in my backyard. One day, as I bent to dig a dandelion root, an odor enveloped me like a fetid cloud. Holding my nose, I backed up, checking around for the source. It smelled like a dead animal! Did something die under the boxwood?

The odor's source turned out to be a clump of stalky red fungi that had sprouted through the mulch overnight. They stood about six inches tall, each one a bright red finger tipped with a hole that oozed a brown, horrible-smelling slime. Gagging a little, I took a quick picture of one and posted the hideous thing on Facebook, begging, "Who knows what this is and how to get rid of it?"

A Facebook friend, also a gardener, soon identified my mushrooms. The fungus was called—I'm not making this up—the Elegant Stinkhorn, *Mutinus elegans*. My friend had added

a list of nicknames for the stinkhorn, including "the devil's dipstick" and a few others that made obvious reference to its shape. (I read about one particularly proper Victorian lady who disposed of the fungus in her garden before the housemaids could catch sight of it and think degenerate thoughts!)

Hoping to rid my yard of the nasty things before they spread, I started doing some research. The stinkhorn, like all mushrooms, compares to the fruit on a plant. The body of the fungus is actually underground, composed of a network of filaments called the mycelium. The mycelium decomposes the soil, which benefits plants by making crucial nutrients more available to their roots. Meanwhile, above ground, the stalk's job is reproduction. Literally overnight, its cells fill with water, causing it to pop up to the surface. It then secretes the disgusting slime, but that slime has a purpose. It smells like rotting meat to attract flies, which then roll around in the slime, get covered with the mushroom's spores, and then fly off, unwittingly doing the mushroom's bidding by spreading the spores far and wide. *Gross.*

Where did the name come from? I read that *Mutinus* refers to a Roman god called Mutinus Titinus, whose favor was often sought by women wanting to conceive. I wondered if a mycologist with a sense of humor added *elegans*, Latin for "elegant."

"Elegant" can be defined as "scientific precision and exactness," though. Stinkhorns are foul things, but they have developed an adaptation that works like a charm. With the help of flies, they live on, popping up, making slime, reproducing so they can break down soil and make it habitable for my perennials. It's very simple—it's the one thing that all stinkhorn mushrooms do once they break the surface. And it always works.

The more I learned about these fungi, the less I wanted to eradicate them. In fact, after a while I felt amazed that this mushroom-fly relationship was going on in my own backyard! I wondered how the fungi figured out how to attract flies. I wondered if other plants in my yard had similar adaptations. I wondered. That's worship, not of creation, but of the Creator who imagines such marvelous things. What could he be imagining in his purpose for my life? I see his work in creation and realize that nothing is beyond him.

Stinkhorns last as long as warm weather, and then they're gone. I decided to live with them (but I did close my windows). Their slime makes my eyes water, but that's not really my business. My business is to pay attention, to bear witness to the God of both grand mountain vistas and lowly stinkhorns. ■

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