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“A Joyous and Frightening Shock”

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Abstract

Keywords

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This paper uses several photographs to focus a hermeneutic exploration of several terms that have become increasingly used in contemplative or holistic education circles: mystery, elusiveness, miracles, energy, and aliveness. It ends with brief thoughts on the effects of the presence of my 22-month-old grandson on various ventures – gardening, seeing and hearing birds nearby, feeling captivated by this Earth – that his grandfather knows well.

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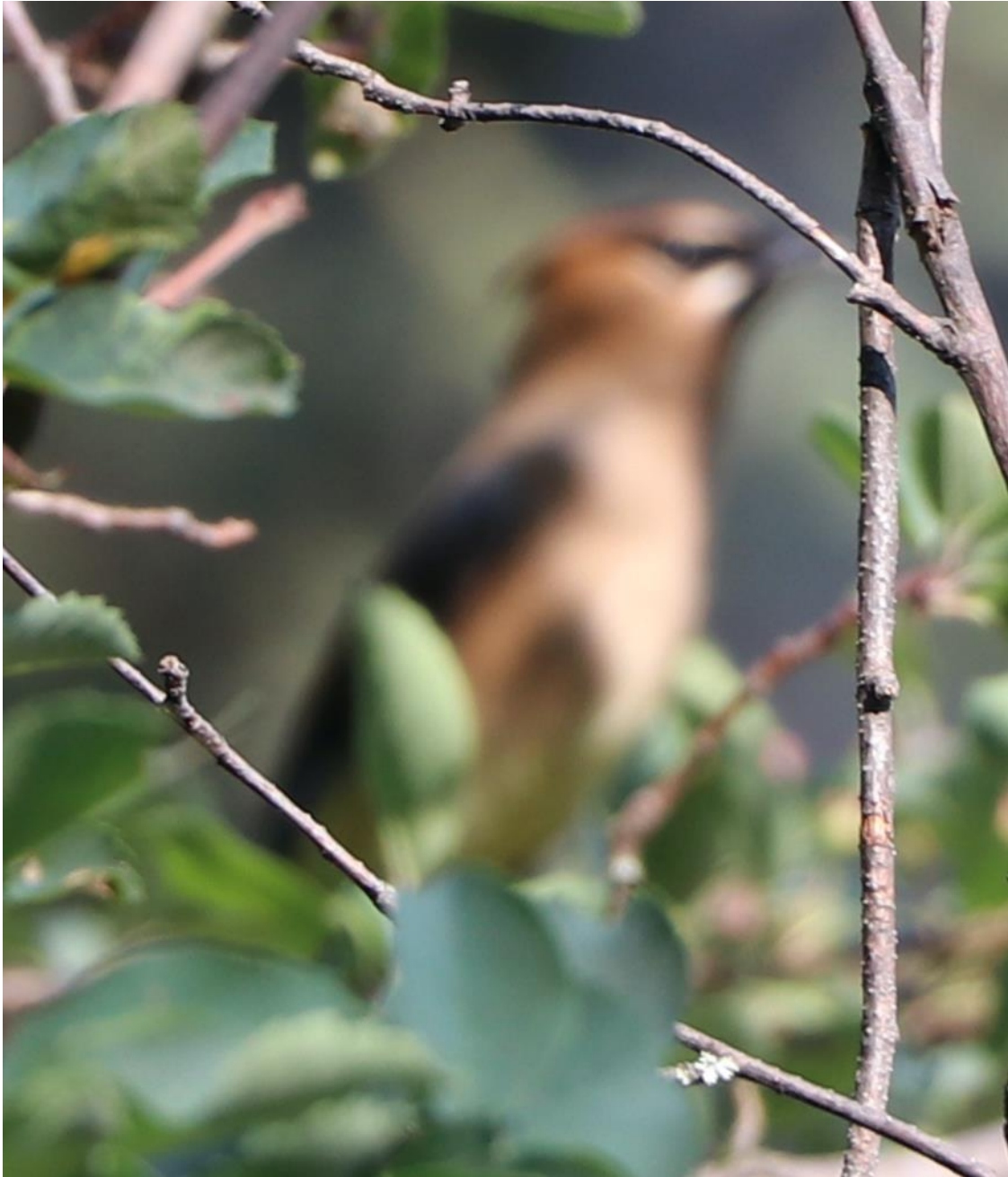
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“A Joyous and Frightening Shock”

Part One: Mystery, Miracles and the “Ten Thousand Things”



Is This Mystery, Here?

Or just a camera's mechanical switch to focus elsewhere?
While Cedar Waxwings sit and wing over Saskatoons' purple ripe sunlight.
The pour-down sluices of having stood there, that moment, this?
And the wizened shivers that I may never see this again, this?
Of realizing that this has always been so.

Even here, typing.
Even there, you, reading.
Is this mystery, here?

Saskatoon-berry-bush tucks a *Bombycilla cedrorum*. Tucked there, too, in Linnaean Latin word-ordinances, the photograph's focus and locus wonderfully betraying each other.

Mysterious? Perhaps. *Mysterium*¹, “a secret rite or worship.” I go with camera alone, *mystēs*, “one who has been initiated,” one who has practiced a bit. But I go out into a gathering, myself gathering air and images and sunlight. My self *gathered*. Courses to take or leave behind every which-a-way.

It is not precisely secret or hidden. It is right there in that photo. That it is a wee bit hidden *from me* means that I am *not* an initiate into *its* secretness but I *am* a practiced initiate into gathering up these images, meditating on them and adoring them, saving them. Showing them. Here. To you and others. Writing and writing. All these relations are how this lovely *exists*. Dependently co-arising (*pratitya-samutpada*), sun included, me included. It *is* its surround. I am my surround in its regard, along with the oxygens breaking downwards in the sun's lights from the trees above, we both take out and in breaths. A curriculum topography. Of course. Pun intended. Of course. Latin, *currere*. *Cursus*, “the flow of a stream.”

Small things like this draw me into the sort of work I've done for decades. Small things like this make me want to sing about the deepening cavity of that focus, about the miraculous arrival of dozens of Waxwings on the Saskatoon Berry bushes, and all the flows that manifest right there. Year after year. And how our deepening “ecological sorrows” (Jardine, 2015, p. xv), betrayed by Red Foxes seen hereabouts for the first time in all my years living here, magpies, too, also betray some deepening, shifting shivers in the courses of things in this place.

No more Coyotes. But still this courses. No living course stays the same. A moment of pause. What is being hinted at behind the focused branches?

Just like “every word breaks forth as if from a center and causes the whole . . . to which it belongs to resonate [and] . . . to which it is related by responding and summoning” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 458). I myself am summoned, here, to approach this nub of inter-relations and write about it in a way that *maintains* its *miraculum*.

As Jackie Seidel cited (2014, p. 7) years ago:

Miracle: From the Latin *mirāculum*: object of wonder. *Mirāculum* from *mirārī*, to wonder at. From *mirus*, wonderful. From *smeiros* [(s) mei–PIE–proto-Indo-European] “to smile, to be astonished.” Also Sanskrit: *smerah* “smiling.” Also Old Church Slavic: *Smejo*–to laugh.

It, then, might be mysterious *to me*. But far more often, it is something also ordinary – something “in order,” “customary, usual” even in the vague smiles when I see a Red Fox flurry and scurry about. I wander around with that camera time and time again. I look up words and settle myself into what they may ask of me in the face of this beautiful Waxwing sight.

Wonder. Smile. Astonish. It is that hit and those gestures of saving and caring for that let its mystery come to sit and stay.

“Astonish” means to be thunderstruck: Vulgar Latin *extonare*, from Latin *ex*, “out” . . . +

¹ All direct etymological citations are from the Online Etymological Dictionary (<https://www.etymonline.com>), listed under the specific term referred to.

tonare "to thunder." In this sort of work, these language enclaves and ancestries themselves surround me in their regard even when or if I toss words off without regard. Each is itself a curriculum topic, each rich and full of voices, "interweaving and crisscrossing" (Wittgenstein, 1968, p. 33), culturally abundant, linguistically bristling, becoming more and more so as other voices voicing other words add themselves to the myriad. "Only in the multifariousness of voices does [any word, any thing, any language, or idea, or bird, or berry bush, or utterance, hope, any 'self or 'other'] exist" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 284).

I've learned to become unable to resist, knowing full well that I'll then have to compose myself in this myriad, this flurry, and make something of it. Our words, the ancestries of our imagining as a whole, works like this: Latin, *myrias*, Greek, *myrios*, both referencing "countless" and "boundless," and also an old Greek image of "ten thousand things."

Here again, why do this? This is why: because I could hear old voices, old memories coming up, this Lao Tzu, (Sixth Century BCE), an image I can now only find in older translations:

Tao Te Ching - Lao Tzu - Chapter 16

Empty yourself of everything.

Let the mind rest at peace.

The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self watches their return.

They grow and flourish and then return to the source.

Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature.

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*. Chapter 16

There it is, hidden in plain sight, this particular translation betraying an old Greek and Latin image, betraying its importation into Lao Tzu's words, me the wee undergrad when first reading this, simply swallowing whole all the old Euro-exoticizing of the incoming words from "the East":

As an undergraduate (in a dual degree of philosophy and religious studies, class of '72) and then as an MA student (in philosophy, class of '75), I recall clear as day that the Mills Library at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, had a collection of editor Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East*. This fifty-volume behemoth was a set of English translations produced between 1879 and 1910 and published by Oxford University Press over that time-period. It took up several shelves, and the books themselves, especially the earlier volumes, were slick and shiny leather-bound, a sort of dark brownish dried blood color that made the collection look like the hide of some great and exotic beast, slivers of which you could slide out and open. (Jardine, 2016, p. 139)

All this, let alone how Lao Tzu's own words are themselves like a Waxwing tucked behind translations, "betrayals" (Jardine, 2016a, pp. 129-130) which both betray –reveal, give away -- something of the "original" and do wrong by it, betray it in that sense as well, all mixed and out of focus as to which may be which. This be how the whole of things gathers us up. Betraying the open bounds of my ears and tongues, now witnessing my grandson be swept up into the ways of words (Jardine, 2023a). Watch out:

This means that one may become so engrossed . . . that they outplay one, as it were, and prevail over one. The attraction . . . lies in this risk. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 107)

Little wonder that Robertson Davies, Canadian author, said, in a line I can no longer trace, something like becoming educated means becoming haunted by more and more ghosts:

From a hill behind a gas station in Scranton, I could see the old ways stitching out in their graves. (Callahan, 2019, n.p.)

Every single reader lives in such a myriad of their own raising and learning and practice and habit and craft, and its edges ripple and lap against the whole single breath. Maybe overlapping, maybe crisscrossing and stitching, maybe able to offer grace and make lightness in the very blind spots I inevitably carry along with any insight. I am not adequate to the whole of things and need its re-focus, its lessons. A slow drive by stuffed toys stitched to Tsuut'ina Nation fenceposts (Paperny, 2021; Jardine, 2023b).

Every light cast shadows. We are each fragile, finite beings, guts and breaths and memory and thinking strung in these nets, strung on these posts. This, too, is part of our shared and contested ancestries – remembering, forgetting, grieving, owning up. This bright pink, plush elephant perched like a Waxwing, barely glimpsed in the highway rush-by of those posts and their burdens.

Part Two: Wonder, Openness, Undone, Elusiveness, Conspiracy, Readiness



Plant Secreties
 Chancing upon
 Green Life Chambers
 White Spindles
 The Great Fathoming of a single being
 Being squeezed out into sunlight.
 Alive to See It. There.

Secrete. Moist. Soil. Light. Spine. Energies. Crackling. Through. Old. Flesh. Bones.
 Sweet. Mixed. Bloods.

My grandson and I bend near plants, as near as breath allows, into the mixed underleaves and their penumbras. Smile. Laugh. Wonder (Old English *wundrian*). Wander (Old English *wandrian*). Shush, now. “Wend” is nearby – “to turn, wind, weave.” I didn’t know these derivations before I checked, just now, while writing. Like plant secrecies, you become accustomed to letting them lure you and speak to you, perhaps. To slow and deepen my tendency to simply flutter by:

The openness to experience that we [can] win through becoming experienced opens us to being outdone. This rings true of the hermeneutic insistence, as well as the Buddhist insistence, as well as the ecological insistence, on the penumbral presence of impermanence as key to any insight to be gained or lost. I *will* be outplayed:

“Understanding is an adventure, and, like any adventure, it always involves some risk” (Gadamer, 1983, p. 141).

“An adventure is ‘undergone,’ like a test or a trial from which one emerges enriched and more mature” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 69).

At least I hope so. Perhaps more resolved. Or resigned. It opens me to the utter certainty that I *will be undone* in bones and breath, sooner, now, rather than later. Thunder snoring over the hills. Louder. Lovelier. (Jardine, 2019a, p. 99)

Perhaps elusive, then? The familiar coinage seems apt: “Insight is more than the knowledge of this or that situation. It always involves an escape from something [Latin *fugere*] that had deceived us and held us captive” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 360). Eluding capture? I think of the heavy dullness that has captured too many teachers’ and students’ hearts and bodies, numbed in the ever-accelerating lethargies of some schools. Such sorrow.

But then there is something about *being captured* here as well, but then eluding enough to try to write in a way that maintains that elusiveness. This is mysterious, I suppose.

Eludere? This means “finish[ed] play” (*lude*) whereas those plant secrecies set something in motion. And there surely is something “at play” here in the “in between” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 295) of human breaths and sights and cameras and grandsons and these plants and birds.

“Something is going on, [*im Spiele ist*], something is happening [*sich abspielt*]” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 104). Spiel. But then again, Hans-Georg Gadamer, citing Johann Huizinga’s lovely book *Homo Ludens: The Play Element in Culture* (1955), was keen on how belonging to and living inside realms of knowledge and ancestries and traditions and habits and habitats and language lineages has a sort of secret (mysterious) “inside” to it:

This is for us, not for the “others.” What the “others” do “outside” is of no concern to us at the moment. We are different, we do things differently (Huizinga, 1955, p. 12).

This is both the comfort and the danger of this locale of work and living in these ecologically troubled times – insiders, outsiders, us, them. Identity is understood, in Buddhist thought and practice, as *the* central affliction of human being, one that is not remedied by the sheer multiplication and affirmation of different identities (Jardine, 2017), as seems to be so commonplace lately. This simply replaces identity with difference, and difference, in the Greco-European philosophical legacy, is the only alternative that identity will allow for itself. Multiple identities simply replicate and democratize the original affliction. Something like contemplative, holistic interrelatedness gets skipped over or turned to subjective mush.

This is not mush, nor is it subjective. It is the earth-orbit we *inhabit* and whose life inhabits

us. My grandson and I approach the bird-feeding and the plant nearnesses with shushes to each other. *Conspirare*, finally in a genuine, ancient sense: Look can you see? Wait. Ahh-startles and giggles and all, breaths (*spirare*) held in common (*con-*), mingling. Is this one breath? No. Is it many different breaths? No. Neither of these expressions are adequate.

And just so the mystery doesn't disappear, "conspiring" also means "to sound in unison."

Ahhhh . . . a great exhale. Our great tilt and bends near plants. Him pawing and plucking and pointing and oohs, such oooohs. He allows me to not find contempt bred in the familiar, as goes that old saw I've never traced before. Ah. Here we are, Chaucer, 1386, from "Tale of Melibee": "*Men syen that 'over-greet boomyhynesse engendreth dispreisyng'*" (Chaucer, n.d.) – him seemingly quoting some older saw given those "sses." Okay, I'll try: "Too often, greeted home-likeness engenders disparaging

Escaping the capture of dull familiarity by finding an enlivening familialness heretofore unnoticed jumping up into play. From capture to fugitive to capture. That familiar Waxwinging, "there, in the midst of things, his whole family listening" (Wallace, 1987, p. 111), leaping up unexpectedly:

How their deaths [its and mine, and I can't quite say it...my grandson's too] quicken the air around them, stipple their bodies with a light like the green signals trees send out before their leaves appear. (Wallace, 1987, p. 40)

A plant secretes. White hairs. Pistils. As Johan Huizinga suggests, play is necessarily "labile" (1955, p. 21).

Read these, then, like passing by -- grandson on fleet foot -- from plant secrecy to plant secrecy. Breathe quietly:

Without the readiness of the person who is receiving and assimilating [*des Aufnehmenden*] the text [the bird, the recess, the plant, our breaths] to be 'all ears' [*ganz Ohr zu sein*], no . . . text will speak. (Gadamer, 2007a, p. 189)

'Being experienced' does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who...because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. Experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 355)

Readiness needs to be sought, cultivated. It needs to be taken care of properly and repeatedly and relentlessly. Readiness takes work, it takes energy, *energeia*, 'aliveness'... and it not only *takes it*. It *produces* it. And when it works, it hits the still spot between give and take and begins to glow. The joy . . . in being 'all ears' creates joy. 'As in love, our satisfaction [in this joy] sets us at ease because we know that somehow its use at once assures its plenty' (Hyde, 1983, p. 22). (Jardine, 2019, p. 104).

PART THREE: Awakened, Energies, Captured, Possessed, Aliveness, Quickening

*Sun'Slight*

So, in early morning rising
 Up to consciousness, part of me
 Must shed dreaming's safehouse and
 Drop the *armamentaria* of sleep.

Open arms
 Expose my heart to the coming
 Sunlight.

For this I have to
 Knock this earthenware off my head.

But I dare not forget how my
 Roots love those dark shadow wares, the foods
 and their encircling wets.
 How too much sun'slight would ruin.
 I must remember that dreaming soils
 Are their own consciousness.
 Are of mine own.

PART FOUR: “A JOYOUS AND FRIGHTENING SHOCK”



Joyous. Frightening.
 “Intrusive power
 . . . a being
 Reposing in itself.”
 Right there,
 trembled under

Raven’s “recognizable and familiar surface . . . contour[s].”
 (Gadamer, 1977, pp. 226)

My grandson looking up at me as we pull buried carrots up from the ground with Ravens arcing overhead. It is so very familiar and slightly staggering to be under this tapered orange purview, under the tossed-up smells of adorable rich earth. It makes the carrots more properly, what? Miraculous?

We smile.

We be fugitive, if even only for this tick or tock dissolving in the clockwork sun.

Aesthesis. Quickening breath in when you’re stopped in your tracks – the juicy bite. The sting of its still-living sweetness to our still-living tongues:

The intimacy with which [this event] . . . touches us is at the same time, in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and demolishing of the familiar. It is not only the impact of a ‘this means you!’ [‘Das bist du!’] that is disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock. It also says to us: ‘You

must change your life!' (Gadamer, 2007b, p. 131)

A second grandson has since arrived out of the nowhere. Out of everywhere. Still unnamed. Warm and wet and asleep on my chest. Is this mystery, here? A plant secrecy? A sun'slight? Us one being reposing in itself. Joyous. Frightening.

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