

“It Will Startle You”: Thoughts on a Pedagogical Conspiracy of Birds

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Seeing the frailty of your life through seeing the breath is the meditation on the recollection of death. Just realizing this fact—that if the breath goes in but does not go out again, or goes out but does not come in again, your life is over—is enough to change the mind. It will startle you into being aware. (Chah, 2001, p. 44)

I

I mentioned during a gathering of teachers seeing a Downey Woodpecker having at the stump in our backyard a few days earlier, how, over and over again, I could not quite resolve the bright yellow patch on the back of its head. I did my best to imagine that it might be an immature boy, and all this work was bent on maintaining myself in its presence and asking, repeatedly, that it yield itself up to my presumptions. Downey Woodpeckers are the only thing anything like this I’ve seen in these parts for the past 30 years.

Funny black and white back design, though.

Then that sudden, oh-so-familiar gulp of air. No, this won’t do: “**Northern Three-Toed Woodpecker**: . . . *yellow* caps . . . ‘ladder’ back. The female lacks the yellow cap” (Peterson, 1980, p. 192).

Such experiences are, of course, commonplace, and they involve a strange, experiential reciprocity. As it finally became what it is—freed from my presuming—I became myself all over again, freed from that very same presuming. Humiliation tinged with joy and uplift, just enough to feel fresh air, some buoyance under the wings. Exuberance (“be abundant, grow luxuriously” [OED]). “Without gut level experience of the other, without sharing his aura, you can’t be saved from yourself” (Illich, 1998, p. 6).

These aren’t exactly meant to be “metaphors.” They are meant, failingly, to describe something bodily palpable about the arrival of this sort of arresting experience. Body-bounded intimacies:

- “the possibility . . . to see everything with fresh eyes, so that what is long familiar fuses with the new into a many levelled unity” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 16).
- “the readiness of the person who is receiving and assimilating [*des Aufnehmenden*] the text [or the bird sighted] to be ‘all ears’ [*ganz Ohr zu sein*], [without which] no . . . text will speak.” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 189)

Eyes. Ears. And both of these framed at the moment in which presumptions “break open” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 360), “break forth” (p. 458) and “reciprocity” (Gadamer, 1984, p. 323) is won by losing myself in order to save myself from myself.

This possibility, this readiness, are things I am still learning about. Here is the ecopedagogical point—this learning is done *in an intimate concert* with these birds and their kin who ask this of me and who, in responding, have shaped my own readiness for that concert:

How could we *be* were it not for this planet that provided our very shape? Two conditions—gravity and a liveable temperature range—have given us fluids and flesh. The trees we climb and the ground we walk on have given us five fingers and toes. The “place” (from the root *plat*, broad, spreading, flat) gave us far-seeing eyes, the streams and breezes gave us versatile tongues and whorly ears. (Snyder, 2003, p. 29)

Thus the lovely paradox of learning that demonstrates that all learning is ecopedagogical: I cannot heed those feeder arrivals if I am not all ears and fresh eyes, ready for what arrives “beyond my wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxviii). And it is precisely as a result of my repeated, often-failing attention to them that such ears become properly curved and shapely and useful.

“All ears” is somehow both cause and effect. It is a practice that is both my own and the locale of being saved from myself.

This is a phenomenological fact that as those ears shape, the sounds of the world shape in near-perfect parallel.

Conspiracy.

II

It would not deserve the interest we take in it if it did not have something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxxv).

First ever noticed arrival of a Steller’s Jay over 30 plus years of looking. March 23, 2017, late afternoon. We’ve long-since had Blue Jays, and more recently Grey Jays have ventured into the woods and under the front pitch of our roof for feed. I’ve seen these Steller’s Jays once before up in the foothills to the west.

It is important to note what happens to attention when its object becomes too familiar for words because such familiarity is precisely *not* noteworthy, but is still full of pedagogical consequence. There is a numbing comfort in Blue Jays, but familiarity—being a ubiquitous and quickly recognized “part of the family”—can be a type of dulling *an-aesthesis*.

After that Steller’s Jay’s departure, a good old Blue Jay lit on the same feeder and sent a shiver of strange and thrilling recognition through long familiarity, long-settled memory.

That (with a gasp) is a Blue Jay. I could finally see its smallness, its variegations, the beauty of its Alberta sky-blue, unlike the swarthy dark indigos and glinting metallic-ness of the Steller’s Jay. This is a type of knowledge that has an important place:

We do not understand what recognition is in its profoundest nature if we only regard it as knowing something again that we already know. The joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar. In recognition, what we know emerges, as if illuminated. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 114).

Because of that Steller's Jay's arrival, that Blue Jay is now newly experienced as *among* Steller's Jays nearby. *Everything has changed*, for now, even the once-familiar, ignorable squawk ("a harsh slurring *jeeah* or *jay*; a musical *queedle*, *queedle*; also many other notes" [Peterson, 1980, p. 208]) is a sound now, fresh ears, among a heretofore-unsuspected surround. For the Steller's Jay: "most common a very harsh, unmusical, descending *shaaaaaar*; also a rapid, popping *shek shek shek*. Also a clear, whistled *whidoo* and quiet, melodious thrasher-like song" (Sibley, 2016, p. 295). Maybe those previously ignorable sounds are *not* all Blue Jays after all. Once familiar sound-surroundings lift up off the ground in suspense, asking for readiness, freshness.

And when a Blue Jay pitches itself in the lower spruce branches, now, fleetingly, it squawks "as if illuminated."

And a detailed differentiation between two types of Steller's Jays in *Sibley's Birds West* forced me to wait until another one appeared. I didn't notice this differentiation before because I didn't know till now that noticing *that* was notable. So, a sort of anticipation that comes with coming to know. Those moments of waiting for him to return in full knowledge that he may have been passing through in the arc of spring's arrival, never to be seen again. By the way, do they "pass through?" Just checked: They do migrate, but it tends to be up- and downslope, not north-south. Like bears soon to visit the compost heap.

Yes. There, on the feeder. And yes, too, an open-bottom V of white above the beak, and white eyebrows. An Interior West Steller's Jay (Sibley, 2016, p. 295).

Whidoo!

III

"Texts are instructions for [the] practice" (Tsong-kha-pa, 2000, p. 52) of precisely paying more intimate and proper attention to the resounding. Don't worry. Study, properly practiced, will not ruin the *aesthesis* of ecological reveries, only their limited and limiting naiveties. (Jardine, 2015, p. xxii)

In our teachers' gathering, it was suggested that the term used for the work of kindergarten classes that are variously called "outdoor schools" or "forest schools" might be "co-conspiracy" with the vivid curiosities of children. And, of course, that co-conspiracy goes beyond them and us and out towards those Steller's Jays as well, then looping back to reappearing Blue Jays and from there over to Peterson and Sibley and other elders and maps and specificities and back again, there, stop, see?

Co-conspirators. Young children are often mytho-poetically figured as heralds of the new, of new life, and the great Romantic hope that they can be reliable sources of fresh eyes and wide ears, saving us elders from ourselves, saving the world from its mortality through the sheer “fact of natality” (Arendt, 1969, p. 196). But then, Sibley and the ancient noticings that he has gathered and detailed, saved me from myself as well. Read properly, study can herald. It, too, can be conspiratorial. Just as was that Jay’s reappearance. The conspiracy is broad and rich and unbounded. One breath away.

Co-conspirators. This word sent me back to a nearly impenetrable paper I read years ago by Ivan Illich (1998) titled “The Cultivation of Conspiracy.” As a former asthmatic, this image of “*conspiratio*, a commingling of breaths” (p. 8), well, took my breath away when it was mentioned. That first gasp when that once-presumed-Downey Woodpecker yielded to an encroachment of suddenly shared breath whose reciprocity goes far beyond ears and eyes. It is almost unbearably intimate. “Fresh eyes,” “all ears.” But also, *conspiratio*. My breath halts as it halts on the feeder:

You draw in your breath and stop still. The quick intake of breath, this little gasp—*hshshs* as the Japanese draw between their teeth when they see something beautiful in a garden—this *ahhhh* reaction is the aesthetic response just as certain, inevitable, objective and ubiquitous, as a wincing in pain and moaning in pleasure. Moreover this quick intake of breath is also the very root of the work aesthetics, *aisthesis* in Greek, meaning sense-perception. *Aisthesis* goes back to the Homeric *aiou* and *aisthou* which means both “I perceive” as well as “I gasp, struggle for breath,” as in *aisthōmai*, I breathe in. (Hillman, 2006a, p. 183)
Aesthesis . . . means at root a breathing in . . . of the world, the gasp, ‘aha,’ the ‘uh’ of the breath in wonder . . . and aesthetic response. (Hillman, 2006b, p. 36).

IV

[Some startling event] captivates us just as the beautiful captivates us. It has asserted itself and captivated us before we can come to ourselves and be in a position to test the claim . . . that it makes. In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth [Greek: *aletheia*, meaning variously opening what seemed closed, remembering what seemed forgotten, enlivening what seemed dead ordinary and familiar] and arrive, as it were, too late. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 490).

Aesthetic response as a conspiratorial response. Here’s a whispery secret. I *adore* these: *jeeah*, *jay*, *queedle*, *queedle*, *shaaaaaar*, *shek shek shek*, *whidoo*. I’ve often joked about how these make me want to teach phonics to young children. They also make me wonder about what an interesting job it is to be assigned to write these. Whorly ears.

I’m slowly realizing that, having lived with these Blue Jays my whole life, right back to when, as a child in Southern Ontario, I often mistook their squawks for squeaking clothesline wheels, I’m just now learning all over again about this

parade of images and sounds and lives, theirs and mine, too. About a life-long conspiracy that went on despite my attentions or distractions.

The purpose of bird watching is not about getting a longer and longer list of things that I can now ignore. Its purpose is to make almost unbearable the folding layers of sweet and inevitably fatal conspiracy that we live and breathe, such that the next pair of migrating Canada Geese overhead becomes miraculous.

The pedagogical co-conspiracies of teachers, students, old, young, sound, voice, text, memory, will startle you, over and over again, into being aware.

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