

Effortless

It is a rainy day in the Time of the Corona Virus Pandemic. We are on our twenty-third day of “shelter in place”, which means we only go out for necessities. My wife, Shelagh has not left the house for almost two weeks. Our days grind slowly on as we try to keep ourselves amused and busy. We are quickly coming to the end of the little house chores that fill time in our self-imposed isolation.

I keep remarking to my wife how surreal it feels to be sequestered in our safe, little cocoon of a house and life, while outside in the hospitals and medical clinics, thousands of people are lying in agony, dying by the droves, being carted away in freezer trucks. Of course, we are doing what we are supposed to do, but I feel a little guilty to be so safe, well-provided for and healthy, while the rest of the world is in the throes of panic and suffering.

To avoid my acute cabin fever, I have kept up my hiking regimen to get out of the house. My usual hike is Bishop Peak, just on the outskirts of San Luis Obispo here on the central California coast. It is one of the Seven Sisters volcanic plugs that march inland from the great Morro Rock, jutting out of the ocean like a breaching whale, to the city. It is a substantial mountain – 1,500 feet – a strenuous hike, very rocky and steep. A good workout. I call this mountain my meditation – the healing quiet of my Sisyphean task – my nemesis and friend.

I hiked the peak on one of the last days they allowed people to the summit, hauling my aging body up the rocky trail, applying my will with each step as if to prove my unvanquished virility. I rested on a friendly ledge near the summit to rest, gazing out over the majestic panorama of city, valley, mountain, hills and ocean. Still and beautiful in spite of the swirling turmoil that was gripping human life below.

I doffed my hiking pack, laid my trusty weathered, wooden walking stick on a boulder and turned to sit down.

That’s when I saw it.

As I gazed off in the distance – one usually peppered with the black, plebian wings of turkey vultures, my eye became riveted to a shimmering stillness. There, in the middle of the vast expanse, suspended motionless amid the buffeting winds and updrafts, was a single, magnificent Red-tailed hawk, perfectly balanced and seemingly calm within the cacophony of cross currents, its wings outspread, its crimson tail gleaming in the cloudy light. There was a fleeting moment when I struggled to comprehend what I was seeing. The rest of the world withdrew. If I didn’t know better, it was as if someone had painted it there for my enjoyment. I stood transfixed, allowing it to indelibly etch itself on my mind’s eye. I excitedly looked around for someone to share this amazing sight with, but I was alone. I was the only witness – me and the Hawk.

I watched as it hovered in mid-air and then suddenly dropped straight down several hundred feet out of sight, like an apple from a tree, only to rise up again to the same spot a few moments later. It continued hovering, periodically dropping straight down and then back up, searching for the best view of the fields below.

Nature is humbling us with its show of power and devastation – making it all too clear what little control we have over our world. We are frightened to be made aware of how little control we have over our environment, how it can turn on us at any moment and make a mockery of our lives. The recent panic buying many people engaged in when the virus first broke revealed our desperation to try to control some small part of our lives – grabbing as much toilet paper as we can lay our hands on.

I stood and took in this vision, soon realizing how rare a moment it was. I was probably the only person on the mountain at that precise moment to witness this. I somehow felt responsible for capturing it so that I might convey it to others in this time of calamity. This was a gift.

Like my friend the Red-tailed Hawk, we too are being buffeted by updrafts and crosscurrents. Our stability is being challenged as never before. We are having to learn new survival skills, to reach deep within ourselves to find the strength to endure. Maybe if we'd just be still for a moment – breathe – look around us - survey our world – allow life to blow by us for a few moments without feeling like we must control it – subdue it – overcome it. If we allow life to carry us for a bit, this could be a time of rest, reflection and regeneration. – just for a while. We could experience what the Nordic people call *hygge* (hoo-gah) – safety and shielding from the world. Perhaps we could adopt the notion that our homes embrace us, offering us harmony, togetherness, shelter. We might find the deep wells of strength and faith that carried our ancestors through World Wars, plagues, famines, Depressions and all manner of environmental disasters. We might find our balance, our stability, our calm amid the chaos.

I have witnessed countless beautiful panoramas and creatures in my many sojourns in nature, but this one left me spellbound more than most. I felt as if I had received a vision, a glimpse of some glistening truth, an insight into life's true nature. As if the veil of existence vanished for a brief moment so that I could perceive something beautiful, true and eternal. I received a rare gift on top of Bishop Peak, and I feel responsible to convey it at this time of calamity.

Are we up to the challenge? Can we allow ourselves to soar on the currents that we are confronting now? I think it is time we try. Maybe it won't be so hard. Maybe, just maybe, it can be like the hawk. Effortless.

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