

Surprise from Above



By Caron Harrang

Ever since COVID-19 struck with full force in mid-March requiring Seattleites to ‘stay home/stay safe’ I’ve craved being outdoors as respite from long hours working by phone or by Zoom. Feeling cooped-up even as I’m grateful to be able to safely work from home when so many are unemployed or risking their lives working on the front-lines.

I’ll admit these daily outings have become routine and, in that way, somewhat monotonous, but still part of what keeps me sane in what can feel like an increasingly insane time in so many ways. More on that later. Beforehand, I want to tell you how one of my recent walks became suddenly, well...not boring, and honestly, a little scary.

It was Tuesday, June 2nd, which happens to be my birthday. I was in a good mood, looking forward to the day; feeling grateful for many things and looking forward to dinner outside with family later in the day. The weather was sunny and comfortably warm as I donned my red handkerchief mask and headed out for a brisk three-mile walk in Myrtle Edwards Park.

For the first twenty minutes or so I had my headphones in listening to an episode of *The Daily* podcast titled, “The systems that protect the police”. Maybe not the most chill listening

material for a walk, but part of educating myself about race in America, which feels like a moral imperative.

In my face-masked, earphone ensconced state I was only dimly aware of my outer surroundings for the first part of my walk. Nevertheless, with each step along the familiar pathway I felt my shoulders relax and my breathing deepen. When NYTimes reporter Shaila Dewan finished her report on the Minneapolis police officer whose racist brutality ended the life of George Floyd, I felt it was time to unplug and let the quiet of the natural world surround me.

Rather than staying on the main path that follows Elliott Bay going north, I turned right to walk along a side road where there are fewer pedestrians. I lowered my mask and continued walking, feeling footloose and free. Then, suddenly, from above my head and to the left a dark form came swooping down. As I turned to see what I'd caught in my peripheral vision, a large black crow flew surprisingly close to my face, landing on a fence a few feet away, squawking like a maniac.

Parenthetically, I'll say I have a great fondness for crows, so I at first took her approach as a friendly gesture. I think I may have even greeted her saying, "Hello there." Thus, it was surprising and confusing when she left her perch, flew up fifteen feet or so, and then dive bombed toward the back of my head, all the while screeching angrily. I looked around, searching for clues as to why this gigantic black bird, who'd appeared out of nowhere, was suddenly targeting me. After her second dive in my direction, it dawned on me that perhaps I'd inadvertently strolled too close to her nest and she was trying to protect her young. But there were no trees around and it seemed quite random that she had singled me out; for no good reason is how it felt.

I was starting to feel not only unnerved but a little pissed off. I like crows, for Pete's sake! Couldn't she sense this? Crows are amongst the most intelligent birds on earth and I hadn't disturbed her nest or done anything I could see to deserve this attack... which kept coming, by the way! Once, twice, then three times she soared above me before dive bombing straight for the back of my head. I wasn't wearing a hat, but did have on a fleece vest that I quickly removed and started waving in a circle, like a lasso, above my head, all the while yelling at her to "leave me the @#&! alone!" I didn't exactly run, but picked up my pace, hoping once I was out of her territory she might finally let me be, which is what happened.

So, here's where the story gets weird. When I was finally a good distance—maybe a block or so—away from where the ambush began, I realized I was reluctant to retrace my steps on the way home. Who knows, maybe she'd be waiting for me if I returned by the same route? I didn't want to find out. Instead, I took a longer route that hooks up with the main path through the park along Elliott Bay where there are plenty of other pedestrians and cyclists. No murder of crows there, I figured.

As I strolled toward home it suddenly dawned on me that how I felt being singled out and attacked by this formidable corvid is analogous to what Black Americans, especially Black boys and men, experience on a daily basis. It was a strange realization made palpable by the adrenaline still coursing through my body coupled with a sense of aloneness in having no one witness what I'd experienced. Okay, nothing horrible had happened. The crow didn't make physical contact with me, which I understand can happen in these sorts of encounters. For example, one woman in Montreal reports, "I was going to sit outside for my lunch break, as per usual when it is nice out, when I was chased by [three] very large crows. I had my hair pulled and [an] earring pulled out of my ear painfully." (Metcalf, J. 2017)

Still, I asked myself, what if this sort of attack happened the next time I went for a walk in the park? Worse, what if crows sought me out *every time* I went for a walk, no matter where I went? What if there were nothing I could do, no strategy I could affect to change the situation, and it kept happening day after day, week after week, month after month without end? Honestly, I think I might eventually decide to stay inside to avoid the situation entirely or get a slingshot and shoot any crow who came near me. If I couldn't reason with my attacker or find a way to 'live and let live' what choice would I have?

As it is, I can reassure myself this one-time attack happened not because that particular crow, or crows generally, have it out for me. Most likely she was defending her nest and I got too close. In fact, in a strange way, I feel grateful to her for helping me to demonstrably feel, in some measure, what it might feel like to be a person of color in America. To be someone who can't pass off being targeted by telling herself that White people are just 'defending their nest' or being self-protective.

James Baldwin notes, "To be [Black] in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time." (Blay, Z. 2017) In a rage because there's nothing Black Americans can do to turn the tide of racism. This country was founded on racism and it will continue until those of us who identify as White understand how our identities are inescapably linked. As a psychoanalyst, what I appreciate about Baldwin's perspective is how he grasped—decades ahead of the present moment—how we unconsciously attribute what we're afraid of (sexuality, aggression, dependency, vulnerability) to others and then try to control or destroy them, *as if what we project into them isn't part of us*. Or as Baldwin puts it poetically, "What you say about anybody else reveals *you*." (Blay, Z. 2017)

The surprising thing about racism—at least to me—is how it can feel like an attack when its revealed—just like that crow—which makes it all the harder to see as emanating from within, based on unconscious arrogance and greed. Alternatively, if I can see, as Baldwin did, that redemption lies in reclaiming aspects of myself, disavowed and attributed to others, then maybe it is possible to live life with a measure of uncertainty and humility in order to be fully ‘only human’.

References

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