

**The Baby Squirrel and a Murder of Crows:
Reflections on Innocence, Compassion, and Peace**

**By
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Abstract:

When I was walking my dog through the park last Spring, I came across a baby squirrel who was in the process of being pecked to death by a murder of crows. In that moment, I found myself without reflection or consideration, dedicating myself to the squirrel's protection. Since then, I have reflected a great deal on this event and have been moved continuously by the strength of even the memory of this struggling tiny creature. In this paper, I will present my reflections on this story in consideration of the various points of view which I imagine were at play during this story; my own, the baby squirrel's, the crow's, and my dog, Max's. I will relate these reflections to Levinas' understandings of responsibility, proximity, and peace as well as to the call for ongoing therapist responsiveness and responsibility for the patient's suffering in the process of psychotherapy. Levinas writes that responsibility for the Other in the Call of the Face means that "I cannot let the Other die alone"(Levinas, 1998, 104). The naked defenselessness of the human struggle to survive is a call that must be answered through our own connection and openness to vulnerability. We are given this opportunity for connection and openness as children; innocent and responsive to the world, as murderers or protectors, bystanders or healers, and as therapists, we move continuously to answer the command of "Thou Shalt Not Kill" in responsibility and peace.

The Scene

It was around 8:30am on a beautiful sunny Friday morning last May. The leaves on the trees were fully unwrapped from their buds, beginning to deepen their green, and life was raucously resounding at Volunteer Park where I was walking my dog Max, as I do most days. It's one of our favorite parts of the day. We were just rounding the corner in the grass stretch behind the Seattle Asian Art Museum when I heard the crows. They were excited about something, calling to out to all their kind, announcing, warning that something was happening, "come, get in on this". Not wearing my glasses, all I could see in the distance under small grove of Buckeye trees, were four crows in a cluster with several more scattered around the circle, pecking at something on the ground. Max was curious and so was I. We walked over to see what the commotion was. On the ground,

being pecked to death by the crows, was a tiny, terrified baby squirrel. I was stunned as I watched the terrified squirrel alternate between trying to fight off the crows in short bursts of charging one of them, only to be pecked behind his back by the others, and giving up. When I realized what was happening and what I was seeing, without thinking about it, I charged the crows myself. Max, thinking this was a great game, did the same. The crows scattered momentarily and I knelt down to see if the baby squirrel was alive. He was completely rigid, lying face first on his nose. His nose was red and I thought I saw a little blood on it. I stroked his back and saw that he was still breathing. Max came in for sniff but I shoed him away too. Then, quite suddenly, the tiny squirrel's limbs softened and he rallied, came to his feet again and began to charge at me and Max. "Oh good", I thought, "he's alive and he's spunky, he can take care of himself now". So Max and I started to walk away. Of course, as you all probably could guess if you know anything about crows, the crows had waited, not quietly, continuing to call for reinforcements, waiting for us to leave. As soon as we moved away, the crows returned, with more of them, to their game. I watched as the baby squirrel again rallied defensively, only to be pecked again from the flanks. The squirrel again became rigid, falling forward again onto his nose, and I once again ran down and scattered the crows. This time I did not leave him. I stayed with him until he rallied again, this time much more weakly, and I scooped him up, my movements tracked closely by the crows, and I found an especially thick holly bush where I placed the squirrel deep in the densest branches. I left him there but stayed to see the crows wait until I left to return. They knew where I put the squirrel but they gave up on the holly bush because it was too much trouble. The crows would not forget me or Max or the squirrel.

Why tell this story?

This experience in the park left me feeling very rattled and changed somehow. I reflected on various aspects and viewpoints of this situation. My first response was anger; crows are not supposed to be killers but scavengers. Their numbers, as the appropriate word “murder of crows” describes, somehow seemed emblematic to me of the way the world gangs up upon the weak. The seeming gratuitousness of their behavior left me feeling overwhelmingly outraged at the unfairness of these odds. Later, I was aware that, in the moments when I charged the crows, this was precisely the kind of thing I would do and did do as a child. As a child, I had a clear understanding of justice in these dynamics. As the youngest child who was often the dominated one, I found a sense of purpose in trying to rescue and save anything and everything that I could (this is a common early positioning for people who become healers, nurses, and therapists). I knew that this tiny squirrel would die if I did not save it, and that did not feel acceptable. (As a side note: I later found out from the park groundskeeper that these crows had killed all of the baby ducks in the park a few weeks earlier.)

Before I go on, I would like to contextualize this story from the potential point of view of the crows. Crows are deeply intelligent, highly social, and very organized creatures. They are scavengers but move with great numerical sophistication, not unlike the mafia. Especially in the Spring, when they are hatching and introducing their own young to the world, they are extraordinarily cacophonous, calling to each other extensively to alert the others over every opportunity and danger in any situation. They are known to have long and indelible memories of people and situations. Baby squirrels and ducks of the Spring are part of their scavenging collectivistic survival lifestyle.

These young are as good as already dead and provide a perfect means and opportunity of reinforcing the social order of the crows. We can see clearly the advantage they enjoy in their ability to communicate with each other, to learn, and to seize upon any opportunity. How they use their numerical advantage can also be clearly compared to human social orders who utilize group think, mass marketing, and war as a means to dominate and control others.

As for the baby squirrel, he was quite young and very small, he fit in the palm of my hand. As I looked at his frozenly shocked body, I felt a surprisingly overwhelming sense of both sadness and love for this little creature. What also surprised me was that I was aware, even at the time, that I strongly identified with the squirrel. How many times in my own life, or in everyone's life, have we had an experience, or a chronic backdrop of experiences, similar to being pecked to death from all sides? How many times have we simply been rendered paralyzed by fear and helplessness, the weight of the numbers systematically conspiring against us? In those moments, it seems easier to give in, surrender to, and even welcome death as a companion of relief, as a friend, as the ultimate oasis.

I found out later that what was probably happening to the squirrel was what is called "tonic immobility" or animal hypnosis, a reflexive state of paralysis and unresponsiveness to external stimuli, usually in the face of life threatening circumstances, also known as playing dead. In animals and in humans, this phenomenon is often considered to be the last-ditch defense to severe trauma, such as in cases of rape, torture, or being eaten alive. The grace of this generous nervous system response is astonishing.

If the limbic system perceives that there is neither time nor strength for flight or flight and death could be imminent, then the body will freeze. In this state, the victim of trauma enters an altered reality. Time slows down and there is no fear of pain. In this state, if harm or death do occur, the pain is not felt as intensely. People who have fallen from great heights or been mauled by animals and survived, report just such a reaction. (Rothschild, 2000, pp. 9-10)

My little squirrel, in his rigid, frozen moments was doing the most natural thing of all; his tiny body was giving up and giving in to the relief of death.

The response I had to this scene was visceral and immediate. Only later was I able to gather some sense of what I was responding to in my own life but also in my memory of other people who had been systematically worn down by the circling crows of their life; other people whom I had been quite powerless to help. I remembered an extraordinary newly ordained Presbyterian minister from a small community back in Pennsylvania who had taken on the role of leading a small parish just months after her ordination. She was profoundly intelligent and spiritual, fresh, idealistic, and very inexperienced. The church community had been all but crushed by grief when their long-term and most beloved minister had committed suicide before revelations of his homosexuality were printed in a local newspaper. Aching and devastated from loss and guilt, the elders of this church did not take to the new minister and proceeded to systematically critique and tear down every idea, every sermon, every action she made until, in short order, she resigned from her post to begin healing and reclaiming something of her integrity.

Last August, my husband and I were celebrating our anniversary at a new hotel downtown, when we looked out of the 8th floor window of our room in the morning and saw that police had blocked off the street. I wondered if they were preparing for a parade until I looked out of the other window to see the King County Medical Examiner truck on the street below. I was stunned to realize that the police and the medical examiner were collecting pieces of what, only a short time before, had been the integrated body of a human being. Two city blocks of people had inadvertently born witness to the culmination of another person's tonic immobility and were themselves traumatized by their helplessness and the gruesomeness of this very public suicide. Powerless to help this stranger in life, a few days later, I went down to the place on the street where it had happened and I offered a small smudging of sage and sweetgrass as well as my prayers for the person and the community. While I was there, a woman came and quietly placed a bundle of flowers at the base of a tree at the sidewalk. She looked at me and quickly walked away with tears in her eyes.

As a very young child, I intuitively understood that we are all connected. I did not question my place in the human community. Without thinking, I would act upon the call of the Face of the Other, the claim the Other made upon me was immediate and unselfconscious. My actions were unclouded by a lifetime of sedimented grief and pain, by the burden of rational analysis and synthesizing. I responded to vulnerability as a protector, as a friend, as an ally. Of course, I would not let the other die alone. Of course, each life was precious and important. Of course, justice means I will not idly stand by watching from imagined safe distance. I was small but somehow, not naïve or ignorant. I was passion from the Latin root *passus*, to suffer or undergo, deep and

powerfully experienced emotion, yet entirely and completely unaware of itself as a type of positioning toward the world. The rational and analytical reflective journey was still on the way, hollowed out by experiences of pain and devastation, the deepening vacillation between moments of intense suffering and the desire to understand them, achieving distance from them, placing them within a comprehensible world order. I was, more or less, for a time, innocent, from *in*, meaning free from and *nocere*, hurt or injury. My response to the call of the Face the Other came not from any sense of Levinasian separation but rather connection. My innocence was prior to an awareness of separation, immediate and unselfconscious, just free flowing passion.

My experience last May with the crows and the baby squirrel was a faint echo of the childhood immediacy of my prior self. In this instance, I acted to save the baby squirrel but running through my thoughts were questions of “Is this normal behavior of crows?”; “Why am I trying to save this tiny squirrel?”; “Why can’t I just let this happen?”; “Who am I doing this for?”; “Is this just about the circle of life and the survival of fittest?”; and, as odd and nerdy as this sounds, I was thinking about what Levinas might say in this situation, “What does Levinas mean that responsibility is that I cannot let the Other die alone?”. Sometimes the Other just wants to die. This line of questioning led me to the key component of his statement; the word “alone”. Levinas does not say, obviously, that responsibility is to not let the Other die. We all certainly must. My responsibility is not to save the Other and, in so doing, perhaps even save myself. My responsibility for the Other is to strive for connection, for proximity, and for peace in the face of the ultimate separation. My responsibility comes from my ability to

be claimed, to be shaken, or as Levinas says, “held hostage”, by the horror of not death in and of itself, but of the Other facing theirs alone.

For Levinas, my ability to respond, my response-ability, is grounded in my ability to be called into question. The call does not come from me but rather to me and through me, from the Other. It is a call that stands outside of time and reason. It is a call that arrests me, isolates me, singles me out for action. As a child, this was precisely how I acted. I did not ask or know the reasons for my immediate recognition of vulnerability and my intense engagement with the animate world. Squirrels, birds, rocks, and trees were alive to me, connected to me, *mitayuke oyasin*, all my relations, we are all related. At the park that day in May, I remembered this truth and I was filled with both grief for the violence and inherent unfairness of oppressive forces of these worlds of crows in our lives as well as the joy and delight of being able to be claimed by the vulnerability of suffering Other of the squirrel.

As I grew up, the range of what I was able to respond to increased even while the social pressures to inhibit my active engagement also increased. As I grew more aware of separation, I was more able to painfully relate to the nuanced complexity of the suffering of others. I was able to move from pure passion to an increasing sense of and ability for compassion. *Com* means together or with, to join with the other together. And, again, *passus*, meaning to suffer or undergo, to submit and surrender fully to the Other. This movement calls for not a rejection of pain but a full and complete openness to it. But this pain, importantly, is not a masochistic descent into the vacuous and endless depths of suffering for one’s own sake, one’s own death as Heidegger would have us believe of resoluteness and anxiety. Rather, it is the immediate and undeclinable claim of

compassion for the Other. As the circling and spiritually corrosive effects of the pecking of our crows increase, we are called to our response-ability, to compassion, to join together with the Other to be with them in the struggle to rally. As I watched this tiny squirrel vacillate between the tonic immobility of death's merciful surrender and increasingly futile and waning fits of fight, I was moved to act on its behalf. I admired its courage and its striving in the face of such incredibly poor odds. In those moments, nothing mattered more to me than staying with that squirrel, live or die.

Levinas calls the immediacy of this claim or this address by the Other "an-archic responsibility"; an obsession. He writes; "here I am in this responsibility, thrown back toward something that was never my fault or of my doing, something that was never in my power or freedom, something that was never my presence and never came to me through memory." (Levinas, 1998, p. 170) I do not decide to act. It is not something that I know or think. I am obsessed because I am unable to relinquish or shake the hold of the claim of the Other upon me. I am not free. I am elected. I have to. I belong to the Other.

This is precisely the naivete and innocence of wonder, of openness, of immediacy that we are born into as life begins, our human community, that we are *mitayuke oyasin*. We are not born alone and we do not die alone. Yet, we often live as though we are alone, in suffering, in sickness, in isolation. The person who ended their life jumping from the 8th floor balcony, did not die alone, quite the opposite. This person lived alone. Every person who was there was transformed and traumatized, unable to assume the everyday mode of walking past another person as though they were an object. The media does not report on these suicides except in very public cases such as Robin Williams.

The reason is because this kind of death puts us at risk, the contagious effects of suicide. We are moved to join, reminded as we are of our own vulnerability, pain, and isolation. And even more, even further, as Levinas says, as implicated as accomplice in the Other's death. On August 2nd, hundreds of people responded to a post on Reddit of someone who, like me, had seen the aftermath on the street of this suicide. All were shaken, all were upset, all were looking for something to do. Many decided to meet the next day, to share their grief, their anger at the injustice and pain of living, and to find a human community again where we do not live in isolation.

Alphonso Lingis (1994) writes that we can become community in death. In *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, he wrote of an experience he had in the south of India when he was desperately sick with fever and an increasing paralysis of his limbs, where a stranger, a Nepalese fisherman transported him through a monsoon sea to a hospital 65 miles away where he could receive medical attention. In this unsolicited action, this fisherman intervened as he lay dying. In this stranger and the imperative which moved through him, Alphonso obviously not only lived, and thank you so much for being here today, but something of his initiative and power went forward into Dr. Lingis' life, the living of his life, as well. He writes; "the touch of consolation opens the path, in the time of endurance and suffering, to an accompaniment in dying and finds brotherhood with the other in the last limit of his or her destitution." (pp. 178-179) In death, in this proximity, we return to each other, we reach for each other as we are reached for, we remember our home of our birth and so too something is born in us anew through grief, through compassion, through the irreplaceable gift from the Other to be for the Other in response-ability, our ability to respond. This is the wisdom of love.

Iris Murdoch's (1958) quote rings true to us. In *The Bell*, the Abbess's words to Michael become her words, her belief, her truth that,

“Good is an overflow. Where we generously and sincerely intend it, we are engaged in a work of creation that may be mysterious even to ourselves, and because it is mysterious, we may be afraid of it. But this should not make us draw back ... we can only learn to love by loving.”

In the moments of tonic immobility, when our crows are circling in the absolute vulnerability of suffering and enduring at the limits and thresholds of our life, we find brotherhood and sisterhood, our human birthright. It comes from the Other through the fires of passion, which are transformed in suffering, into the alchemy of compassion, to act for the Other, not only to not die alone but to not live alone. In each moment, to overcome the power of the inertia for living for oneself, to act, to be for the other, is the birth of creation even in, or especially in, moments of dying. Levinas calls this the inspiration of the Other in me, an awakening, a sobering, where I keep watchful vigil for the Other (Levinas, 1998, pp. 29-30). The Other does not die alone and leaves in me a lasting hunger for the peace of that proximity.

References

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