

Dinosaurs, Cello Loops, and the Avalanche of Awe

Written by Alex Baer

Saturday, 01 February 2014 19:05

There's a certain, spectacular wonderfulness that comes from being ambushed by Beauty. The experience can be disorienting, dazzling, dazing, delightful. It can be stealthy and breath-taking, shorting your oxygen before you realize you're no longer continuing that familiar ebb and flow of air in and air out.

Remembering to breathe is the thing, when bushwhacked by Beauty.

It could be I am just out of practice and easily ambushed these days. That's a possibility. My circle of travels has been slight for the last year or so. I have worn pairs of ruts into the roads between home and hospital, and permanently scuffed and squeaked my rubber-soled footfalls on the waxed and buffed tiles of antiseptic hallways.

My guard was down. And, yeah, it's been a while since anything whacked me upside the head, leaving flickering lights and multicolored whirligigs exploding overhead -- like a cartoon character magically smitten with the blinding high-beams of romantic attraction, all stars-and-planets overhead.

Yes: It has been some time since an avalanche of awe slip-slided my way. It's been a while since I've made the time to dangle a hook of interest into streams of consciousness other than my own, and just fish, for fishing's sake, for the heck of it.

We all get busy. Our plates get too full. Things slide. Fun takes a back seat. We get closed off from new experiences. Our paths and ruts deepen as we age -- even though we might prefer to think of them as the calm that comes with security, sameness, satisfaction.

Rote living is not living. Autopilot is no pilot. The automatic governor may help your mileage, but it knows nothing about passing on the straightaway. A trotter can't tell you much about a steeplechase.

We forget the childish joys of exploring, discovery, of being in a perpetual state of awe. The

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older we become, the more our energy and attention are re-routed, detoured, usurped by adulthood and its needs.

Could be, at times we're just too tired for Beauty -- at the fogbound end of the working day, our senses are sapped and slow, as flexible as pig iron, as responsive as a sack of cement.

Me, I've not had the pleasures or pains or pay of work for some time. I have other lame excuses. I blame life calluses and the absence of the Sixties. I've also been somewhat preoccupied with staying alive, staying one step ahead of cancer's love affair with portions of my anatomy.

Excuses, excuses: Truth is, you can get out of the habit of having Beauty drop by for a visit. Once you stop expecting them and no longer look forward to them, those visits can start to feel unwelcome, and those visits can stop coming.

It's a shame if they stop coming. just as it's possible to become hard of hearing, it's possible to become hard of thinking, hard of appreciating, hard of feeling. It even becomes possible to forget a lifelong tenet: To stay young, always practice a childlike sense of awe.

Pretty simple, really. I have no idea why it is that we all have such trouble remembering the simple things. I can tell you from experience that it becomes much more possible to remember them if you've been forced to fight for your life a little.

I've never found it very satisfying to have it suggested that we all need death in order to appreciate life -- that we need sour to appreciate sweet, that we must have dark to love or understand light. But, I have to quickly add, that I have come to understand those sentiments a bit better, even if that argument is still about as satisfying as trying to drink library paste when parched.

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And, if you don't want to go with *staying young* as the operative concept, you can use other traits, states, conditions. You could say, for example,

To stay vibrantly alive, always practice a childlike sense of awe

. Whatever word or phrase you want to plug in there, it will, I hope, be a synonym for some aspect of living that is about as close to ecstasy as mortals can get.

... which is the whole point -- relearning and rediscovering the *wow* factor. The *wow* factor is energizing, invigorating, and even joyful. In cartoon terms, such a state of blissful *wow*-ness would be portrayed by lightning strikes to one's person, sticking one's digits into electrical outlets, and holding on to downed high-tension power lines -- all with the requisite neon glow and day-glow shock lines.

I hasten to add, none of those cartoony states should be attempted at home, of course, except by trained professionals, wearing helmets, on a closed course, with an overflow of emergency responders, and lawyers, on hand.

I also hasten to add I am not a perky person much prone to fits of joy. I have not knowingly twirled in circles, holding out an imaginary dress or apron, proclaiming the hills to be alive, and so forth. However, in the same breath, I would freely admit to really enjoying being hogtied and held hostage by Beauty, by Wonder, by Magic.

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I have recently been surprised and kidnapped by Delight. Almost as good as the original enjoyment and near-trance state? Why, sharing the experience, of course.

Toward that end, I am pleased to direct your attention to potentially unfamiliar ground: a discussion of the dinosaurs' demise, and to a live cello performance incorporating looped -- electronically repeated -- musical phrases and ideas.

Both items in my renewed creel come from dipping my fishhook of curiosity into the stream of consciousness that is a radio show called RadioLab, a production of WNYC, as heard on NPR

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and via podcasts by knowing downloaders, and so on.

The dinosaurs arrive by way of a live stage show from the RadioLab folks, and turns on its head the version of extinction we've all heard throughout life: *There was this asteroid, see, and then Ka-Whoom! a lot of dust goes up into the atmosphere, blocking out light, and eventually, over many decades, there is a long, slow die-off of plants and animals.*

The end.

New version: After tens of millions of years as the dominant species on the planet, it's all over for the dinosaurs in about two hours -- not in the familiar scenario of a long unwinding via a nuclear winter, but more of an involuntary road trip through an endless pizza oven. More like bobbing for french fries, while they're still in the basket, still submerged in hot oil, boiling and bubbling away.

In this, the presentation is as much a wow factor as the new theory. I am a sucker for audio-visual stimulation -- it's the way to my heart, not my stomach. I mean, what can I say? Hosts Robert Krulwich and Jad Abumrad have me dialed in -- as much as any concert or film or play.

The other torrent of unexpected bliss comes from a cellist, Zoe Keating. She accompanies herself via bits of her playing that has been stored and then replayed during a live performance. It was an unexpected bonus -- one that came from fishing the waters of an appearance by the RadioLab guys, Robert and Jad, at Google, for a discussion on creativity, among other things.

The guys provided the excellent, informal cup of coffee, as anticipated; no one said anything about the unexpected, equally extraordinary European croissants and pastries framing that heady, gourmet brew being on hand, too.

(As good as the live show and the informal presentation both were, I now wish I hadn't used the food analogy -- my stomach is now making dinosaur growls of its own, looping 'round and 'round.)

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In any case, there is something quite wonderful that comes from volunteering for an avalanche of awe. Prepare to be blown away, intoxicated, and delighted by sight and sound: Prepare to be flayed, slayed, waylaid, and mislaid -- all in the nicest ways possible. I'll leave the roadmap down below.

Dangling a hook now and again, in the stream of the mostly-to-somewhat unfamiliar, and on a regular basis, may just allow us the unmitigated luxury in life of being frazzled, flummoxed, and flabbergasted in such a memorable way that we want to go on that ride again and again and again...

... no matter how set in our ways we are, no matter how deep our ruts, no matter what else is happening in the days and nights of our lives.

Behold, the power of art and science, of science and art.

Welcome to *Ahhhhhhhh*.

The Appetizers:

RadioLab's presentation of the dinosaur apocalypse, from about 19:40 to 54:00.

(From about 13:30 to 54:00, if you want the large-scale, dinosaur puppet intro)

One teaser song from Zoe, about six minutes of wow, running from about 32:10 to 37:56:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Jdqc8a2uKc>

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The Main Course:

RadioLab's live "Apocalyptical" show in Seattle:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K52vD4WBdLw&feature=youtu.be>

RadioLab and Zoe at Google: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Jdqc8a2uKc>

The Dessert Cart:

RadioLab's site: <http://www.radiolab.org/>

About RadioLab: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radiolab>

Zoe's site: <http://www.zoekeating.com/>

About Zoe: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoë_Keating

The bonus mint at the cashier counter / on the tab's tray / upon the room pillow:

A music video: <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91909-stochasticity-bonus-video>

The tale on which it was based: <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91684-stochasticity>

And, seven minutes of wow from Zoe: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sG9H5E2JN3s>