Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Nero Fiddled. A French Queen Offered Cake. It Did Not Go Well.

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 28th, 2020

I know a headline like that makes very little sense in the 21st century, but these are highly abnormal times, with an entrenched pandemic, raging fires and people losing lives, homes, jobs, businesses, dreams and minds. Worse, too many are too young to have started on a serious path in life to see their dreams stuck in neutral.

On a personal level, I'm one of the lucky ones — older (much), in one piece so far, reasonably healthy, housed and fed, with time on my hands to read and write.

Prompted by months of staying-at-home, however, a question from my daughter took me by surprise:

"What do you do all day?"

Tricky. We're still locked down, sort of — I certainly have been, seemingly forever because I fit the "endangered species" demographic and my daughter and granddaughter insist on grocery-shopping for me. (I don't dispute the demographic, but I dispute why *they* are shopping for *me*? Common sense dictates that *I* should be shopping for *them* because I'm actuarily more expendable.)

But to answer my daughter's question, what I do all day is… tinker.

I tinker with my thoughts, my reading (frivolous to deep), the ants in my kitchen (they think it's theirs), the cookbooks I'm newly addicted to — and the old family photos sprawled over the dining-room table since mid-April. I'm hoping to identify them for all those future generations that may not care about them at all.

More blatantly, my recreational pleasures consist in large part of gardening and watching the wild birds and bees that populate my back yard. I get a kick out of the birds frolicking in the popular equal-opportunity birdbath, and I make a point, when I can, of saving the bees that come to it for a drink and fall in. Bees float and struggle, but can't swim their way out, though they expend huge amounts of energy trying. That perforated spoon sitting on the wall next to the birdbath is for scooping them out alive if I get there in time.

Centuries ago it seems, when I was actively and happily employed, someone asked me what I might like to do when I retired. My short and sincere answer was: “putter.” I never had time to “putter” then, and the brief time I spent at home not working I considered a form of “visiting my house.” Aside from the fact that I had a loving retired husband in that house who also was a great housekeeper, pretty good cook and mostly was a lot of fun to be with, I yearned for more time at home to just enjoy it all and slow things down a bit — not too much, because I also enjoyed my work. The contrast between hours spent at home and hours working made each more special.

Still, I yearned for the moment when I’d be *living in* rather than *visiting* my house, and that time — more of it than I expected — has certainly arrived.

As you may suspect, “puttering” is just another word for “tinkering.” Choose your nomenclature. The French writer Alphonse Daudet may not have been one of the *great* greats, but he wrote something I’ve hung on to: he encouraged his readers to spend more time looking at *small* — those much smaller creatures living all around us, when they’re not living *among* us. The insects. Daudet became convinced that we could learn a lot about ourselves by observing them.

I espoused the idea in principle when I first encountered it, but did nothing about it. Now that I’ve put it into practice and spend more time with ants than I could ever have imagined (big year for ants and elections, folks), I can certify that Daudet was right. Ants are more like us than you’d think. Like us, there are too many of them in all the wrong places and, like us, they have panic attacks when threatened. Try spilling vinegar in their vicinity. It’s a spectacular crowd-dispersal tool. It doesn’t so much kill as repel ants. They panic, scatter, vanish. Done.

A sizable congregation of the busybodies showed up on my kitchen counter recently, intent on divvying up a tiny crumb of banana bread. I poured a teaspoonful of vinegar on a paper napkin and lightly placed it over them, assuming it might kill a few and chase away the rest. Two hours later all the ants were gone. They either carried away their dead, if there were any, or they all panicked and scampered off, taking the crumb along with them. Either way, it was an astonishing rout.

Even the tiniest birds are a whole lot bigger than those black kitchen ants, but wild birds, big and small, are at the top of my list of creatures to observe and learn from, because birds *really* know how to enjoy life. When they’re not bathing or pecking around for worms or other morsels, they play games. Social games. Usually in my rosemary bush. Foraging bees spend a lot of their waking hours competing with humming birds for the succulent mauve mini-blossoms on that same bush, but they’re only dealing with the bush’s exterior surfaces.

For the bees it’s more of a regimented serious search for nectar. Not so the birds. On late summer afternoons those chatterers play their social games *inside* that bush and those games, whatever they are, provoke a lot of merry chirping.

In the end, what these small and smaller creatures taught me is that there are better ways of spending time than rushing from one deadline to the next. They don't worry, certainly not about eating or paying rent. I hear some of you groan. I know I'm oversimplifying, but there are lessons in all this, some sweet and some profound. One thing that all of this forced stay-at-home has taught me is that there are many more simple pleasures to enjoy than the many we so often — and so effortfully — seem intent on inventing. Silly things like going to bars, watching game shows, spending hours shopping for things nobody needs or watching big guys deliver concussions to each other at massive sports events.

So the mind wanders, drifting from tinkering with words and thoughts that may not seem weighty yet are weightier than they seem. Thanks to the trifecta of birds, bees and ants, so constant in their pursuits, I've been wondering why we're so fickle and restless in ours. Why do we relentlessly seek something *more*, *bigger*, *better* or *different*? Do we need to top the simple joys we were seemingly designed for by chasing after artificial ones that leave us mostly unfulfilled? You don't have to answer that. But think about it.



It's a bit of a mental leap, yet in this seemingly endless election season I find myself wondering why/how this country — so carefree, bold, outgoing and *united* during World War II — could have transmogrified into the combative, angry, prevaricating and divisive entity that it is today. America has never been without its original sins of slavery, land theft, broken promises and more, all of it sugar-coated by an oversized amount of jingoistic fantasy.

We seem so lost in this self-deceptive bubble and unwilling to examine what works and what doesn't in the way we live. We're always quoting the Constitution, but rarely mention the one thing in it that truly matters: the pursuit of happiness. Wild birds don't miss having a Constitution and they *live the meaning* of pursuing happiness. Real happiness, not the *ersatz* stuff advertisers palm off like snake oil. Folks, we have work to do.

Let's start with a game of what if…

What if… we could put the bazillions of dollars we currently toss into that bottomless pit called national elections to seriously good use? Such as take the money wasted on bickering political parties that inhabit a misnamed Congress, deprive them of the costly perks they've voted for themselves and have done little to deserve, and put it into…. governing?



What if… we use that money to rebuild and maintain our infrastructure, increase the minimum wage, provide quality health care and education (including apprenticeships for the non-academically inclined), feed the hungry, house the homeless, stabilize the unstable, turn empty lots into neighborhood mini-parks (two trees, a spot of grass and a bench) and have money left over to build bullet trains that could crisscross the country like useful rollercoasters?

A few other societies, large and small, thrive under forms of democracy that recognize the importance of honoring this responsibility to the people. It has no other *raison d'être*.



So you can see that "tinkering" for me also has meant sticking my nose in places I had not intended to go. The birds and the bees and even the ants have shown me that individual accommodations

made for the benefit of the group can be a movement for good. When you vote five days from now (unless you've already voted) you'll get a chance to bring all this animal wisdom a little closer.

Don't blow it. It's your quadrennial turn at the birdbath.



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