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Intersecting Pathways

"I look into those impressive eyes. . . . [T]hey are eyes filled with stars. . . . It may be in such eyes that the universe first discovered a way to look back upon itself." (David M. Carroll, The Year of the Turtle, 24)

Back around the turn of the twentieth century, Clark Wissler, then in the employ of the Museum of Natural History in New York, was out in the field working among peoples of the Plains nations, gathering what he could of who they had been. On one particular trip among the Lakota, he obtained among other items some women's dresses. In an article that followed, he explained what the women told him about the pool of beads on the front and back yokes of the dresses. Edged in a triple row of alternating dark and light, following the lines of the breastbones running across the front, from scapula to neck, across the shoulders, from one outstretched arm to the other, and along the women's upper backs, is a vast expanse of blue beading, a body of water in which we see the reflection of the sky. The U-shaped edging at the sternum calls up the breast of the turtle, with the wing-like extensions the sides of its shell, and in the blue waters carried by the turtle are reflections of objects in the sky or on the shore. In patterns that might at first glance seem merely decorative or ornamental are five-pointed stars and clouds with angular footed ends contained in a reflection; the world, the sky refracting each other, one existence carried by the other, the turtle carried by the woman, the woman carried by the turtle, one existence carried in the reflection of another.



In an early Buddhist text from the Samyutta Nikaya, there is a teaching that gets to the heart of human birth. Imagine, the teaching goes, a boundless ocean, existing for endless eons. And on that ocean floats a wooden yoke, like the yoke a farmer woman might wear when she is carrying water. Submerged in that ocean, a blind turtle is swimming, and only once every hundred years does it come to the surface to take a breath. And when it does, when it comes up for air, it is fitted with that yoke. At that juxtaposition of space and time, in that boundless ocean at that instance when the turtle seeks air, its breath expended, its head breaks through the surface of the water right

in the centre of the yoke that has been floating on that boundless ocean for all those eons. Such is the rarity of the human birth, the teaching explains. Just as the possibility of that happening is so infinitesimal, so is the rareness of a human birth. This precious human birth—the Buddhist text draws on the allegory of that concurrence when space and time coincide to remind us of the gift of human birth.

But what of turtle life? What of the preciousness of turtle birth? To borrow the words of David M. Carroll, “the earth has been looked at through turtle eyes” for millennia. To be a little more precise, one 100 million years, and then more than half again; a million, 180 times over; 180 million years of turtle birth. Theirs is a lineage that stretches back to near infinity. Through cycle of creation after cycle of creation, from the late Triassic period to now, their genealogy is long and surprisingly straight. Way back then, they settled on a life form that served its purpose: a skeleton that is the inverse of ours, outside instead of within, a few tricks of breath regulation, and an enduring metabolism. With but a few modifications here and there—soft shells, retractable or semi-retractable necks, preferences for certain environmental niches—turtles have remained turtles. As the old expression goes, “My friend, it is turtles all the way down.” When the high plains desert and badlands the Lakota know as their home were seas maybe 100 million years ago, turtles not so different from those of today inhabited the waterways.

In the cataclysmic changes that brought the Mesozoic era to a close, turtles were among the few complex life forms that continued on. Hedging their bets not with change and adaptation but with a capacity to endure, they got through the ash and sulfur of volcanic eruptions continents away and the other events that presaged the asteroid. In the cold and darkness that followed, dinosaurs were lost, but the little turtles who knew how to stop their breathing for months on end managed to survive. Some of their giant relatives didn’t, but little turtles did, giving testimony to their time-tested encasement of life. Millions of years of turtle birth. Millions of years of continuity and vitality, all carried within a turtle shell.

Still, its encasing shell notwithstanding, a turtle’s life is not self-contained. Interconnection rather than independence sustains it. The turtle is an ectotherm; all of its physiological functions—digestion, growth, reproduction—harness the heat from the sun, the cold from the waters, to carry on. Possessing no internal combustion engine, the turtle basking on a rock draws on solar rays to enable it to digest its

food. And after emerging from its long winter sleep, it needs the earth’s heat to reinvigorate its suspended life force. A turtle’s life is not completely its own; it owes its life to the triple-layered universe, the watery underworlds, the earth, and the celestial bodies in the sky. It rides the changing rhythms of the primordial processes of earth, water, and sky.

In the northern hemisphere, nearly all turtles enter a state of suspension in the winter season. Many spend their winters buried under water. In occultation, enveloped in mud, under water and ice, they draw upon the near-perfect cold to slow their metabolism. Time stretches out for them. One heartbeat every ten minutes, and a much, much longer interval between breaths, maybe as much as five, six months. No humans could possibly hold their breaths so long, but turtles have their means of managing. In this altered state of existence, they shift to other methods to meet their needs. They are survivors, and they are good at beating the odds against them. Somehow turtles survive, those ancient ones whose eyes have looked at the earth for millennia.



For years I shared terrain with an old she-turtle. Given her size, she might have been forty years old. Her world was the same riverbank I regularly walk, but our encounters have been few and far between in the decades I’ve roamed this land. Different spatial, temporal, and physical rhythms governed us as we moved through the same space. Still, for me, seeing her was a summer rite that marked out a certain regularity in the shift of seasons and a sense of place, in the way that place is signified through time. But whatever thrill I had from catching a glimpse of her was matched by indifference, sometimes even shunning, if I ventured too close.

One early summer evening a couple of years ago, my husband, Jaap, drew me to the bridge, where below she was swimming, moving gracefully through the waters as she foraged for food. A few days later, we encountered Mabel, one of our Amish neighbors, and her brood of kids standing by the side of the road, looking at the huge she-turtle trying to cross it. So we stopped, my husband helped get the turtle off the road, and we continued on. Some forty minutes later, as we were on our way back home, there, right by the first bridge, was the she-turtle, this time badly injured, having been hit by a car. I left Jaap standing by the bridge to make certain another car didn’t finish

her off, while I zipped home to find some cardboard. I found a big sheet of cardboard I had in the shed and, almost as an afterthought, grabbed a box. She'd been looking for some place to lay her eggs. They were scattered all over the road, along with her blood.

Triage marked the next sequence of actions. We eased the she-turtle onto the cardboard. I gathered up the eggs, and then we carried the turtle down to the river, leaving her in as good a place as we could find. As we settled her in, her eye locked in with mine. There I was holding a box containing her unfinished journey. I told her I'd do what I could.

But where? Somewhere where I could keep an eye on them. On the way back home, I told Jaap I was going to plant them in my garden. Planted, that was the word I used. I think I meant to say bury them, but the difference between planting and burying is the difference between life and death.

I thought, maybe this year, God willing, I'll have a crop of turtles.

Summer came and went, the passage of time marked by research into the life cycles of snapping turtles, especially those who inhabit northern climates. I fretted about depth of soil, the summer's heat, the long period of drought. Should I water them? I worried about whether the cover I'd fashioned gave too much shade and would prevent their lives from taking hold. Turtles know how to harness the natural forces and how to ride the solar stream, but I didn't, at least not from a turtle's perspective.

A farmer friend told me about the vagaries of an egg's incubation period, all dependent upon heat, moisture, the conditions being right. "They ripen in their own way," he told me. Carroll's book offered troubling comfort, "with one hundred and eighty million nesting seasons behind them, turtles must be accorded credit for something better than luck." He also talked about how some northern populations wait out the winter in the nest as advanced embryos or as hatchlings, placing their bets for survival on spring.

The golden days of mid-September came, and with those, memories of once, years earlier, finding a turtle so small I could scarcely believe it was a turtle. A hatchling, barely an inch in diameter, it was aiming toward the river when I came across it. I held it for a few brief moments before setting it down to let it continue its journey. Instinct had taken over.

Prompted by that recall, I checked my cache for any signs of movement. Curiosity got the best of me. Finding a stick, I loosened the soil to find an egg, which I removed and examined for viability.

Its shell beckoned in its soft whiteness. To my untrained eyes, I couldn't say if the colour spoke of life or of unfulfilled possibilities. A sphere with no beginning and no end, until I broke it open to find embryonic eyes staring back at me. I'd come, maybe hoping for hatchlings, maybe just expressing hope, wanting to know if the eggs survived, and with an act checking for its presence, I'd managed to destroy any viability contained within that egg. Hope, and an act that foreclosed upon it—at least for that one egg. The others were still undisturbed.

In his explorations of modern identity, Charles Taylor speaks of virtue in conjunction with the axes of moral life and meaning. Dignity, a sense of respect for and obligation to others, and an awareness of what constitutes a life worth living make up these axes and provide a framework in "which we make sense of lives spiritually." But, as he continues,

the invocation of meaning also comes from our awareness of how much the search involves articulation. We find the sense of life through articulating it. And moderns have become acutely aware of how much . . . [that] depends upon our own powers of expression [and how much that] depends on, is interwoven with, inventing. Finding a sense to life depends upon framing meaningful expressions which are adequate.

Meaning, as Taylor notes, is presumed to be a state of existence, but in an active sense, meaning is what is offered through articulation and expression. As Taylor observes, "More and more, we moderns attain meaning in the first sense [that of a state of existence], when we do, through creating it in the second sense [namely through expression]."

To open the egg was an act linked with previous acts that sought meaning in an outcome. The prior expression of saving those turtle eggs to plant in my garden sought both affirmation and fulfillment in what it produced. Here, the difficulty was to separate the action's meaning from its fulfillment; its expression and acknowledgment rested on results. Inspecting the egg I took from the nest I'd planted sought to verify that meaning. It, like all the other actions leading up to it, was an intervention, all of them intrusions on turtle lives in a world where neither turtles nor I live in complete isolation from each other. Yet, while not completely isolated from each other, we have no real partnership. Like the gesture of nodding to a stranger on a country road, my act of rescuing the eggs seemed worth doing because it made meaning for me, an act of acknowledging another

that served to acknowledge the self. Or, to put it another way, one could ask, "For whose sake did I seek to cultivate those eggs?"

Whose sake, indeed. The work of field naturalists indicates that once given to the earth, ninety percent of embryos and hatchlings are lost to predators. Those eggs that I planted, what about the rest of them? Did any of those little lives survive? On that I have no definitive answer. I'd learned my lesson and vowed to intrude no more on that cache of eggs, no matter what. Spring came, and the weather broke. Still, the vow of not disturbing didn't preclude observing, so periodically I looked to see if there was any sign of activity around the nest.

By the latter part of April, I could see that nothing was stirring. One Sunday I was out doing garden work around the nest. It was as I had left it in September. Wednesday, the same thing. Friday, a glorious day, with full sun and summer temperatures. Saturday, the perfect spring rain. Sunday, I was out in back when I saw it. White tailings trailing away from where the nest had been. The leaves I'd used for a cover the previous fall looked as if they'd been scattered, and here and there were strips of chalky-white egg shells, curling from their clean thinness. The nest was excavated, and all but two of the eggs were gone. Those were brownish yellow, the colour of decay, and unlike the white tailings, they had inside what looked like mucus and worms, the earth feeding on what coated the insides of these shells. Decay and earth's reclamation.

The rest of the cache was gone, but with the rains, I couldn't tell if the excavation had started as inner scurryings when life discovers locomotion, or whether a skunk, a raccoon, or some other predator had come along. No tracks were visible. All that was left were the white tailings. Soft white peelings from the turtle eggs. The rains had washed away all tracings of tracks, so I couldn't tell what had happened. Only the evidence of the shells remained. Although I thought an animal had found the nest, on closer examination, I think the turtles made a break for it. Quickened with life, they woke and crawled out of their nest into the light. The river was calling, to get there an unthinkable long journey.

In truth, there is nothing except my imagination to assure me that they made it. Nothing to verify those eggs shaped like little ping-pong balls actually transformed themselves into turtles. No sign that any of them survived. As much reason as I assert, as much intention or will or desire, it is something that cannot be known.

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That she-turtle and I, we shared space, though I'd be hard put to claim we shared place. Ours are intersecting stories, not interlocking tales. In our shared ecology, our domains crossed, indeed, more than once, but they were nonetheless separate domains. She was gone when I went down to the riverbank a few days after we'd left her there. I roamed the riverbanks that summer looking for indicators of either her survival or death. I saw none that year. The following year, I snatched a glimpse of a snapper large enough to possibly be her. It was, however, only a glimpse; I never got close enough to see if its shell bore the scar of an encounter with a motor vehicle.

That she-turtle, her life, became a telling in my life's tales; however, I think I'd be presumptuous to claim that mine became part of hers.

Do the encounters between turtles and humans matter? They seem to—for us, anyway—as demonstrated by the huge number of teachings, myths, legends, motifs, symbols, designs, logos, and more that draw upon our impressions of turtles. We make much use of them in the narratives we weave. Creation stories, cautionary tales, magical symbols, even highway signage all draw upon the image of turtles. We call upon their presence to give witness to us, forgetting that it is really the other way around. Our tales give witness to them. Turtles have managed to get along for eons, despite the many borrowings we've attempted in order to transform their stories into ours.

Bibliographic Note

The description of the beading motif on a Lakota woman's dress comes from Clark Wissler, "Decorative Art of the Sioux Indians" (*Anthropological Papers of the New York Museum of Natural History*, 18.1 (1904), New York: American Museum of Natural History: 240).

The Buddhist teaching appears in the Chiggala Sutta, a Pali text, that is classified as LVI.48 of the Samyutta Nikaya.

David M. Carroll's *The Year of the Turtle: A Natural History* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996) documents the annual life cycle of northern fresh water turtles by following their seasonal patterns from spring through winter. His work filled in many details about turtle behaviour and survival. The quotations from Carroll come from pages 24 and 129. Credit for discussion on how turtles survive in the winter goes to Carroll and David S. Lee, "Complexities of Turtle

Hibernation" (*Terrapin Tails* 3.3 (1999): 1–3 and *Wildlife in North Carolina* 55.2 (1991): 24–27). Information about pond biology and how turtles slow their metabolism draws on Lee's material. In his words, "turtle hearts that beat forty times a minute on a warm day in July drop to one beat every ten minutes in the winter."

The quotation from Charles Taylor was taken from *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989:18). His discussion on preceding pages helped raise the question about instrumental value.