

An Exceptional Path: An Ethnographic Narrative Reflecting on Autistic Parenthood from Evolutionary, Cultural, and Spiritual Perspectives

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Abstract As the recognition of Autism Spectrum Disorder has increased, professionals and academics have theorized its epidemiology and pathology. As valuable as those perspectives are, rarely is the voice of the autistic person heard as a source of understanding. In this ethnographic article, I share my story as a person on the spectrum. I hope to illuminate not the disability of autism, but the reward of the struggle and the gifts that are part of a different way of being. As I reflect on the transformations that have occurred in my life, it becomes clear that my most important role is that of a mother to a son who would himself be diagnosed as autistic in a different context. This narrative offers thoughts about the complex challenges of living with autism—not only from a professional and academic standpoint but also from a deeply human one as well. [autism spectrum disorder, belonging, motherhood, experience]

I remember my own birth, when I was whole and knew it.

Since I can remember—and that is from my own beginning—I have been pierced and pained by the intensity of life. There were many times as a child I believed I would crumble in on myself, my emotional skeleton finally eaten away by the screaming and clutching of a modern society that dissolved me—normal life, other people call it.

I knew from my earliest years that I lived in a culture that trains disconnectedness. Even kindergarten, can be the worst possible place for a naturally connected person to be. The loudness of the bells, the smell of the other children, the endless, cramped facing one direction and trying to pay attention to only one person saying only one thing, and all this in a setting without the kind of warm freedom I understood, predicted that I would fail there. I would sit at my desk at school or on the steps of my house and feel the eating away on the inside of me and the growing pressure outside—on my skin, my eyes, my ears—and I would wonder if I would just disappear. I was sure it could happen and I would cry. I felt as though I was made of stone and pain, as if my frame was a crying fossil, my mouth an ancient desert without sound.

Even still, though, as an aging woman, everything—from blackberry leaves to bends in streams—has a personality to me, a kind of resonance that is an extended reflection of myself inviting friendly familiarity. My world is a place where people are too beautiful and

too terrible to look at, where their mouths speak words that sometimes fall silent on my ears while their hearts break audibly. I wonder how the world avoids going deaf from the din of breaking and thrilling hearts and the roar of unshed tears and uncried joy. Still ringing, they grow in my memory, like a looping brown path that makes stories, telling me anything can happen, anything could be true.

This kind of anthropomorphizing, a kind dreaded by most anthropologists, might be attributed by some, *prima fascia* to disability. I don't have a good sense of where I start and end and where the things around me have boundaries. I am always a living part of a living world. I inhabit this living world with everything feeling like an extension of myself, and with myself as an extension of all around me.

To me, anthropology is the practice of trying to understand other things that share one's own experience, and the greater experience of being things of a like kind. Anthropology is seeking a mirror for one's personal experiences. As anthropologists, we can only speak for ourselves, ultimately, and by speaking about what we see and what makes sense to us we pass forward our personal legacy. We are all trying to understand our place in relation to where we are, where we may end, and, perhaps most importantly, who we are in relation to our beginnings, the links in a long chain.

As anthropologists we knowingly pass on the synthesis of who we are, what we see, and the sense we make of it to future generations. I have always known that and reflected on it with the engaging humility the task demands, but even more so now that I know I am shaping a world in which the many sensitive living things include my son.

To me, there is no difference between anthropologist and living world, anthropologist and autistic person, anthropologist and primate, anthropologist and mother. There is no difference associated with these parts of myself in the responsibility I have to be part of and to observe the world I shape for others and the love and responsibility I have for my own child.

I believe that this larger picture is what anthropology was in the beginning and I yearn to understand beginnings; not only the big beginnings, like where the universe started and where we all came from, but also small beginnings, like what comes between 0 and 1 and the ways spirit takes shape. A natural anthropologist, I have always tried to make sense of the primates around me, so different from me in so many ways. A natural archaeologist, I have always been interested in everything old. In the past I find a context in which I am not disabled by hearing everything, by seeing everything, by feeling everything.

It was only a few years ago that I was told that there was a name—Asperger's Syndrome, a form of high functioning autism—for what made me the kind of anthropologist I am and what leads me to ignore traditional definitions and delineations. I remember that I sat in the doctor's waiting room before I learned this name and read in a science magazine that two researchers had discovered that the mean color of the universe was beige, and I was far more

interested in the fact that this discovery explained my affinity for that color and was the reason I collected beige things than I was in being diagnosed. Beige plastic figures made my mind swirl sweetly like tea with too much milk and sugar, beige walls reflected me better than mirrors, and beige buttons fastened me to a reality that otherwise flapped teasingly around me, bringing my inner, porous life together with the hollow howl of the peopled world. These are the kinds of blendings and details I bring to anthropology, even though there is a great prejudice against such permeation in an academic field. It threatens order in both the academic sense and in the personal. That may be why people are afraid of autism.

When most people think of autism they think of violent, unreachable people in worlds completely of their own making, worlds without keys, without structure, feeling no empathy, lacking imagination, and unavailable to the deepest of human needs for contact and love. Having autism is the worst fate parents can imagine befalling their children and they dread its impact on their families.

When a seemingly wild person becomes a connected person in a richly connected world, however, what might be considered the deficits associated with autism—unique sensitivity, a penchant for focusing on minute details to the exclusion of everything else, and then, paradoxically, an unlimited view of the Big Picture and a resistance to indoctrination—become great assets. I had to learn this, though, for like most of my colleagues, a part of me has yearned for validation and approval only from the anthropologists who formally teach rather than the approval of the humanity within me.

Early in my academic training I remember putting the natural way I experienced and talked about the word aside. Of course, one of the first things I learned as a student of formal anthropology was that scientific objectivity was the only valid platform from which to see the world and the people in it. Further, what qualified as people in the world was very much different than what I had always experienced—without doubt blackberries and streams were not in that category and even other primates were not. To me, anything that had been born, that had a start of any kind, deserved to have memory.

Back then, I was desperate to share my love of anthropology, my love of the human experience, with people so badly that I was willing to fragment the beautiful and seamless picture wherein I had no distance as an observer. I wrote as I was taught, as if I were outside the things that were in reality a part of me, a part of all of us. I used footnotes copiously and continually referred to what everyone else thought, constructing a kind of proof that what I said had validity. But the discipline, like religious constructs that shelter other disciplines, is never immune to subjectivity. Sometimes we forget that we seek to be anthropologists to feel connected. That is the central thing that I now find delightful.

Anthropology is a life story. Beginning with my own life story in *Songs of the Gorilla Nation* (2004), and now, when I commit words to paper for an article, or for one of my books, I decide to describe things in a way that reflects my connected experience, more like I think

life happens. The story of us goes back and forward, to the side and sometimes upside down. There are repetitions and instructive omissions. Things come from inside out and start where they end. Infused with the hum and cry of an ancient and archetypal way of sensing and telling, I feel like the animal and the poet that brackets humanity's raw extremes. I am everyone. To me, this is the essence of connection and something I want to cherish for my son Teryk's sake and my own. Just below the edge of my fluctuating consciousness are the voices of the past, faces just beyond sight.

When I write what I know, what I remember, I am told that mine is a magical reality. I listen and talk to animals and rocks, time is both action and peace, both a living thing and a thing that stopped before my own red birth. In a word grown cool after the making I feel a profound duty to admit the illusion of my distinctness and I object to the freezing properties of objectivity. Knowing that there is much illusion in the world I feel sure that my way of being is only a disability of context, that what have been labeled symptoms of autism in the context of my culture are inherited gifts of insight and action.

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My struggles with school and its reflection as a training ground for disconnection started early in my life. From the din and pain of kindergarten to the time I quit high school and was then homeless for many years. People would tell me I "wasn't cut out" for school and normal life and now I know it was because I wasn't cut out at all. I was just connected. I invoke these particular memories here to begin to reflect on how that connectedness, and antidote to all the cutting and dismembering we are taught through formal education, eventually led to my being an anthropologist, a person, a mother without seams.

When I quit school and was homeless in Seattle, I found that the city was a sensory carnival, even worse than school. I knew I needed to be near some kind of nature, always my balm, so I counted out the little money I had and, looking away always, I walked onto the bus and through the people. I remember sweating all the way to my destination, afraid I would get too disoriented to know the right stop. Somehow I found the zoo. It was pleasant there, and I enjoyed the trees and the sounds of the living things. I relaxed some as I walked the thirsty dirt pathways, kicking back dust as I escaped soullessness.

But something very primal and basic happened to me when I turned the corner and saw the gorillas sitting there, dark and solid, slow and waiting. I sat down in front of them and suddenly, the world that had been too loud and bright, too foreign and fast, just slowed down and I felt, for the first time, that I was in the presence of a people I could understand and who could understand me, a culture that lived in the same living world that I lived in. I can remember thinking that it was because of our shared ancient history that I was drawn to them.

That day I sat with them for many hours. I went back the next day and the next. Sometimes I would go each day and sit for hours. Sometimes I could only make it there once a week. But

I always went as often as I could, relaxing more each time as the gorillas' solidity and quietness allowed me to breath and gaze freely for the first time. I watched the gorillas and I watched the human people pass by. The gorillas allowed me to enter their world and regain my humanity through their safety. The glass was gone.

The safety they extended to me was a great gift, indeed. Many of the gorillas had lived through the trauma of seeing their families killed, the brutal journey to captivity, and the loss of freedom. But, like human people, some of them find ways to open up to their circumstances and love with a whole heart. Congo, a 500-hundred-pound silverback gorilla and my best friend, was just such a man. He gave everyone a chance and tried to connect with them. Although our relationship was special to me beyond measure, I think the touching thing about Congo is that he loved so many, reached so many.

His immediate healing toward me was to love me simply and unconditionally, in a way we all want, regardless of our normalcy. I could relax in his protection, be contained by his spirit. In the warm dark of his care I could look up, look around, stretch my sore soul, and see the world. I learned how other people feel, I learned about humor and sharing, and I learned about talking without words. My friend Congo and the other gorillas taught me how to be loved and not run away, how to look into someone's eyes without collapsing, how to sit with someone quietly without the need to become closed away.

Almost like a baby again, and with another chance to be whole, I watched them and learned from them. I wasn't overwhelmed when I was with them, so I could pay attention to social cause and effect, then, with the sense of balance I retained from their strength, I could go out in the world and connect with it. They gave me my personhood. With the gorillas as part of me I began to see that all the people with faces, gorilla and human, were very alike. I recognized companionship and comfort. I recognized smiles and sadness in the faces I saw.

After a while, people who worked at the zoo began to recognize me in turn and I believe they were touched by the way I cared about the gorillas and other animals. I was blessed as they began to take an interest in me and helped me to become a part of the zoo and I got a variety of paid and unpaid positions there. Eventually they encouraged me to go back to school and I worked with the gorillas and made them the center of my studies for over a decade while I worked through college, then graduate school and a doctorate in anthropology.

Congo died on February 27, 1996, just two weeks after his daughter was born. The gorillas huffed mournfully and wailed about his death, feeling fractured. Also sad, the human people at the zoo seemed to ignore their connection with him and wanted to cut him apart and examine his organs, in the interest of science. They sent different parts of his body around the country so that they could be opened up and studied, so, they said, people could understand what had happened to him. The hardest day for me was when they sent his heart away. To keep the part of him I had, I felt a responsibility as a person in the Gorilla Nation to continue to be connected. If I could say yes, to life, to have a whole life in spite of the science, nothing could be cut.

I found that I had a desire to perpetuate the life I had come home to. I wanted a child because I had come to believe that life is the best phenomenon I have ever heard of. The gorillas had led me to consider the miracle of chance coming together and what those combining of living things could mean. One chance in millions makes you begin, and when you think of the chances in billions that a million of your ancestors had to have lived for you to be here it becomes easy to think that it is impossible that you are here at all. For all the things that felt as people around me, the trees, the dun earth, the gorillas, for humans in many ways so new to me, I wanted to have a child to honor those one in a million chances of being a human being on this earth, at this time. I wanted to create another person who could look up at the stars and fill lungs with breath, to count the agony and beauty of love and looking.

I knew that when I had a child, like Congo, I wanted to weave a creation myth for him; a creation myth about how my faults had become gifts, and how the world's faults had become gifts in turn, a myth that would help him remember who he was if he was like me, when his living seemed hard or when he wondered about the world, as all born children do.

These experiences profoundly inform the ways that I look at anthropology and, over time redefined anthropology as part of my living body, my desire to create a cohesive world for future generations, to be a good anthropologist. Like I think any good anthropologist should, I have continued to be concerned by my limitations and faults. I worried many years before my son was born that my faults might still be too great and that if I was autistic I couldn't be a connected parent, in spite of all I had embraced. The mind, going forward and back, again and again . . . What kind of parent would I be? What would be important to me about my culture's rules and beliefs? What would I tell another human being about God, about family, about everything?

When the idea of my son started growing somewhere inside me it was an odd feeling, because, being born without a much of a solid body, I didn't know where to put him. I worried that my diffuseness wouldn't support him, wouldn't give him what he needed. I wondered if he would be like me, if he would someday be diagnosed as autistic.

After struggling with these questions there were a few things I knew. I would try to be for him what the gorillas had been for me and give him the gifts of himself. I would raise him to be an anthropologist—to be good to people and see their value and search for the truth, knowing he would never find all of it. I knew before my son was born that I would sometimes let him go for days without a bath and let him eat chocolate before breakfast. I knew I would be honest when he asked questions, that I would make sure there were no final answers to anything, and because being seen as broken is, to a large degree, dependent on context, I would protect him from the elements of this culture that would wound him wrongly.

At times, to comfort myself when I thought of the harsh environment my son would have to endure, I fell back on what I remembered learning about the ancient mothers before

me—the old primates who would be our ancestors’ ancestors, those that formed a group during the Oligocene over 23 million years ago. Then the ancestors also common to gorillas and human people that grew during the Miocene epoch 23 million years ago, then those of the Pliocene, 5 million years ago, when human and ape ancestors went along different branches of our shared, living tree.

I love to think about our ancestors’ names, and when I was expecting my son I would often say their names, like a kind of prayer for his past and future. I would start with my son’s taxonomy and then go back to the beginning to come full-circle. My son, *Terykus Prince-Hugheseii*, stretching back to *Proconsul africanus* . . . thriving from 23–14 million years ago in Africa, its wide face looking out on its sunny days from beneath its hanging brow ridges, its body as small as a modern Rhesus monkey (Bernor 1983). *Sivapithecus* emerging from Africa 14–15 million years ago, when the land there became dry and the forests bid them farewell and embraced the running grasslands. Looking like a chimpanzee, it walked away with its back to the south, calling softly behind heavy teeth, looking for trees (Hulbert 1975).

And *Ramapithecines*, also from the time before 14 million years, moving everywhere over the lands that saw us. The wear patterns on their teeth tell us that there was a longer period of time between tooth eruptions in *Ramapithecus* children: like our own and the children of apes they had a long childhood. This means that they needed a long time to learn to navigate in their cultures by understanding social rules and becoming able to make things like tools and shelter, and to learn how to raise their own children and be good parents when their turn came (Patnaik and Cameron 1997). These elements of family and home have been with us through the dark and light of millions of years.

I would imagine the *Ramapithecus* children trying to navigate the city, bewildered at the bright shininess for sale everywhere, the rush of fast machines, people that were supposed to be family staring at their difference and seeing them as disabled in the modern world, like me. I would feel vindicated by their oldness; the newness of this culture, so difficult for me, would be a historical afterthought.

At times, though, the prospect of being a modern mother would overtake me. Soon before my son was born my fears about being a different kind of mother came back to me. Surrounded as I was by the same culture that had always pointed out my potential failings as a single entity, I now saw evidence everywhere that motherhood in the material and disconnected world was something every mother needed guidance to survive.

Even more for mothers like me than those of the “normal” type there are very frightening pitfalls; for example, the kind of wild sensitivity autism can bring to the surface at K-Mart is like unto an elemental force. Discomfort and bewilderment in certain settings like that can engulf people like me with such ferocity that people who don’t understand its effects might well believe they are dealing with some escaped animal (Prince-Hughes 2002, 2005).

A day I took a list to the store with me, a list torn from a book about having babies and what they need, was such a time and serves as an example of the ways my archaic perceptions and reactions followed my path to motherhood and illustrates the situations I still struggle with at times.

I hadn't really looked at the list until I got to the store. As I scanned it, standing between two huge isles of wipes, toys, and Pedialyte, the list stated with authority that expecting parents needed ten baby blankets, a large box of disposable diapers, ten bottles with rubber nipples, 20 washcloths, a basinet with bumper guards, and on it went. One needed at least ten baby gowns, baby socks, baby mittens, baby sweaters, several hats, a baby-sized grooming kit, and a booger sucker.

The list took up an entire page in small print. Suddenly my vision tunneled as colors began to grow too bright. My heart beat hard and I could hear ringing in my ears. In the back of my mind I tried to force myself to remember. Blankets were on aisle 46. Bottles were on aisle 21. It was hard to focus on being in the present, in that place. This was what always happened when I couldn't take in so much information. An "autistic meltdown" they call it. Fighting an urge to run to the woods and cry I let the hand holding the list drop to my side. "What did mothers do before all these things were made?" I wondered out loud.

The anthropologist in me prevailed once more. I put the list back in my pocket. I thought of all the mothers that mattered to me. The ancestors, gorilla mothers, the women continents away still living a simpler life. I walked slowly to the blankets. Order and symmetry always capture my attention and I liked the way they were neatly stacked. I ran my hand over their predictable fuzziness, avoiding touching the ones that were yellow—it was a color I had never liked—but when I touched a sea green blanket I was suddenly in the middle of an old memory. I was a baby. I was lying on the floor of my grandma's house on a sea green blanket like the one I was touching; the news was on the television in front of me and my grandpa was sitting near me in a chair. I could smell the laundry soap on the blanket, I could hear the news, I could taste the taste of baby breath in my mouth, milk made sweeter. Then the memory faded. This blanket had mother memory. I put the blanket in my basket.

I reached for a blue bottle on the shelf near the blankets. I had had one just like it, I remembered, but I hadn't touched one since I was four years old. Not caring who was watching, I lifted it slowly to my lips. As soon as the smell of the rubber nipple reached my nostrils I was in the middle of memory again. I was sitting on a gray, carpeted floor, building something important with Tinkertoys. I could feel the red and blue wooden rods in my hands. They were firm in my fingers. In the present again I put the blue bottle in the basket, too, though I knew my son would be breastfed.

When I passed a display of baby food I closed my eyes and searched my files. My brain works like a computer. I look at the categories going by like a rolodex. I was looking for "What Ancient Primate Babies Would Eat if they Ate from Jars." Peas. Yams. Berries. Leaves. I reached for a little jar full of a pale green. I twisted open the tiny glass container and poked

in a finger, bringing it to my lips. Suddenly I was in a high chair at the corner of a chrome dinette, my mother spooning an old food into my now small mouth. I banged on the tray in front of me. My mother smiled. I couldn't understand what she was saying. What my mother was thinking, though, comes to me, what she was doing, what she has done. And what her mother is saying in my mind, and my father, and his father and his mother, also. This is one way my mind works differently.

The past and its people have fed me so many things, covered me in blankets warm and sometimes darkening, nursed my needs and fears. Determined to be simple, I covered myself with the blanket of their trying, drank the milk of their going forward. I decided I would eat what they gave me and pass it on to my son, their faults for flavor, their own survival in the face of fears like mine leaves an aftertaste. That day I threw away the list of what I was told I needed for a baby. I had already been taught what I needed to know.

When I saw the first images of my son through the echoes of an ultrasound he seemed to reflect my prayers, floating in the dark, a small hide holding the old. It was in those moments I was sure he would be more like me than most people. There was a premonition in my son's strong and fearless heart beating, his hunched and curled body hiding in its own mansion in the heart of a growing wild. His teeth were forming, 20 timeless buds hidden beneath the pink, waiting to erupt like fearsome fire. He had grown a fine and delicate hair all over his body, over his very thin skin. He had developed to a point that he could respond to touch, though his tongue and vocal chords were just forming; he could make no sound—a silent howl, perhaps, if he had the wind. He was an animal.

To me, this was beauty.

When he was born, the sack of sea that surrounded him as he grew surrounded him still, and Teryk burst into the world on a tidal wave of salt and water, tears of happiness and the forgetfulness of pain; the pain of a lifetime, the pain of a deathtime. I opened my eyes to see him carefully lifted, an unusual artifact from the ground that had cradled it, and saw him open his eyes and find me. He seemed the kind of precious thing that anthropologists look for all their short lives—something significant and millions of years old, a culture of one; he was a long, brown, skinless key to our ancestry, a spliced film inside out, a memory bone.

I knew even then that through my son I had evolved backward, that I had a culture to dig up where it rested in the light of a family that I had always belonged to, written in both of us. As he grew it was clear that he was like me, as I had foreseen.

There is joy in his way of looking at things. When my son was three he told me, as he has looked out on a winter world, that there are three laughs. Bunnies, he said, are the laughter of God. Plants, he said, are the laughter of Mother Nature. The mountain's laughter is snow. He believes that because whales are several times greater than us that their thoughts are several times greater as well. He thinks that imaginary friends are just people from the past that other people forgot to play with.

When Teryk was four he asked me where suffering comes from. I told him that there were many ideas about that, but that most people believed that suffering came from having a body that was capable of processing feelings of pain and discomfort. He thought about that and then said, “So we shouldn’t eat things with bodies then, should we?” I told him that some very fine people had come to this conclusion and that some very fine people decided that it was OK to eat things with bodies, too. I told him to decide for himself. He did.

The way he is connected has been as terrible a thing as it has been wondrous. When he was trying to save a spider at the library when he was in kindergarten, urging it to climb onto his hand to put it outside, some teenage boys came over and killed it, stepped on it in front of him, telling him they had just saved his life—they said that the wolf spider he was trying to save was a brown recluse. He cried for days about the death of the spider and his helplessness to save it. A year later, I looked through the window of the back door to see him staring intently at the lid of our hot tub. He began to carefully touch his fingers to the place where he stared, cup them, and walk slowly over to the bush near the deck. Over and over he did this. When I came out to see what he was doing, he proudly showed me that he was escorting baby spiders, the size of pinpoints, over to the bush one by one so that they could find a better place to live. He was still whole.

Late in kindergarten, though, he came home from school crying because he was different. Through his tears he told me that he cares about things the other kids don’t care about. When I asked him to tell me more, he said simply, “I am responsible.” He didn’t want to say any more. I hugged him and told him I understood.

I had hoped that the beauty I have shown him about his difference would carry him through, would help him be able to live with one foot buried in his archaic roots and one foot resting lightly on the world as it is here, now. It soon became clear, though, that he was learning, through the flooding of his senses, in a time and place too loud and bright and complicated, that human people can be dangerous. Even though I explained to him that they are also wondrous and beautiful, I can’t argue with what he was beginning to understand.

People fear each other. The flavor of distance seems to me to be how a community organizes itself. The codes of distance constitute the law—for the living and the dead, so people close the lid on the toilet when they sit down to talk to someone else in the bathroom, signaling that they don’t intend to dominantly mark their territory in the midst of the other; and men can’t pick up and hold a crying child who is a stranger. This is why people always smile and say hello more often when they are on a trail in the forest, far from help, than when they are on a city street.

Unfortunately, the chief danger and distance he was learning is that people can tell you that what you are isn’t what you should be. I knew that the children at school were teasing him for talking to plants and bugs and rocks. His teacher told us he had a learning disability and had some attention deficit problems. He was starting to not be able to sleep at night and had anxiety attacks. Where he had always been an easy child he started to throw himself to the

floor and scream over the smallest challenges. He started to be unable to go to restaurants because the lights hurt his eyes and the normal noise of conversation hurt his ears—he would cover them with his hands and rock, trying to get under the table. He developed strict routines and would fall apart if something unexpected happened. He started to develop tics. He was becoming contextually autistic.

There is no doubt in my mind that if he had stayed so deeply embedded in the current culture that surrounds us he would have been diagnosed and would have gone on to lose his way, just as I had. Amid cries that I would ruin his socialization and deprive him of stimulation, I took him out of school.

I have home schooled him for the last three years and he is bright and flourishing. He is contextually open and interested in the world and the people close to him, his family and friends that mirror his gifts and help him make meaningful sense of being a human person, people who are like him in ways that help him to succeed as the anthropologist he is becoming.

Where he had started to be self-conscious of his connection to all the things around him, he now once more takes me by the hand to share the world. When he was at the end of seven he led me to the yard to show me his rollie pollie farm. He had filled his yellow bucket with leaves and dirt, a little lid with water, and some bark for the little gray bugs to hide under, food from the compost bin. I knew he had been experimenting for over a year to find what they best like to eat: dying marigolds.

“What’s that?” I asked, kneeling and pointing to a broad stick leaning against the side of the bucket. It was a ladder so that the rollie pollies could leave when they got tired of being there. I thought of Congo. If only someone had made him a bridge to get out when he was tired of being there. In this moment, I knew that anthropology, in addition to focusing attention on other living things sharing one’s experiences, should be shared not just in theories and papers, but in the perpetuation of mercy and kindness.

Now that my son is nine, we share our sense of wonder that we should be a part of so much. We will be walking and see a leaf fall from a tree. “I felt that like it slipped off my finger and slipped down my spine to the roots of my feet.” I will tell him. His hand in mine he’ll smile and nod.

Together, we will watch a single ant toil with a heavy load, concentrating in silence we’ll squat and watch for time without end. We will be next to a busy street or in front of the mall. Nothing will part our attention from our admiration. “The people going by are exactly like that ant.” He’ll say. Because we understand people and understand ants and understand toil, because we are anthropologists, we know that the ant and the people are true together.

My son asks me the larger questions: When will I die? When will you die? What is life? What is death? He asks the questions each of us will ask for the rest of our lives and perhaps

beyond: What is God? How do you live a good life? What is beauty? He asks with an urgency that resonates with his connectedness, with an intensity that anticipates his own growing, his own possible fatherhood, his eventual passing, his afterlife as an ancestor.

It makes me proud to believe that he was born an anthropologist because he and I have the same gifts. Perhaps he absorbed them through his unfinished cord, the invisible part that was tied to me. Perhaps he got them from all the wild things that went before. I fear and smile to know what his life will be like because of them. I know it will be a good life, a deep life. He will feel.

Recently, my son had a home school assessment. The teacher was stunned at his vocabulary and his comprehension of things he was told and read—he was at a high school level. She was mystified, though, at the fact that he didn't know all of the days of the week, how to recite the months, or how to tell time. I was uncomfortable. I realized that these last things were skills that every child learns to do early. It is one of those ways our culture divides things in important ways that shape a consensus of deep form and identity. There are so many ways to cut between time and people and belief and, sadly sometimes, I know he needs to learn to divide in his turn. As a trained anthropologist, I know how important these cultural elements are and I know he must learn them. As a born anthropologist, I can't ignore my feeling that it is all made up and whoever has the best story, the story that heals the most divisions, should win.

I think about some of the other cultural divisions he will have to learn. It reminds me of a story some years ago, when a three-year-old boy fell into the gorilla enclosure of the Brookfield Zoo (*New York Times* 1996). He fell 18 feet from a wall that marked the boundaries of a world the gorillas would never pass through, from a sky that belonged to others outside the circle above their heads. He fell into the gorillas' cell, their cloister; in a few seconds leaving behind the civilized world of those who capture and into the world of those who release, the world of the wild ones. Everyone feared that the boy would be killed as a gorilla mother, her own infant on her back, approached his unconscious body. But she picked him up tenderly and cradled him, then carried him to a side door of her world, helping him back into his own, a world her own children would never know.

I still relate to humans best and hold the best hope for my son when I think of them as primates who are capable of bridging the same kind of gap that the gorilla mother bridged, capable of reaching out to people different from them and finding value there to save. I want them to reach out to people like me, like my son, and people different from either of us.

We are all strange and broken and beautiful in our own ways. We are each so afraid of disconnection and yet it can't be easily escaped; some say it is an inevitable state of being and, perhaps, the price of consciousness. That fact makes our connections to other living things all the more important to cultivate. There is beauty in our difference and also beauty in our sameness: sameness with other animals, sameness with one another. We feel the loss of so

many things: falling forests, disappearing animals, the loss of each other as we move far and fast in our culture.

I think back to our original ancestors. If they were, as I believe, like me in their way of being, their needs were simple after the eating and drinking: to be loved, to be appreciated for their special abilities, to want to leave something meaningful behind them.

When I, and then my son, take in our last breaths, reversing our first loud inhale with a quiet exhale, when our naked bodies shake, slick with sweat in place of that first wetness when we came into the world, when we have been delivered through that tight, black hole that marks the end and signals the beginning, I hope we will be welcomed back to be a part of memory itself.

The old ghosts will celebrate.

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