

TIP17: Consider the Badger

written by Janice Lee | November 27, 2017



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Let's start with telepathy, which just means, *feeling at a distance*. So that if, off in a distant corner of a room you might feel yourself luminously and genuinely expanding, I might hope to feel some of that in the form of convergence or sunlight coming in suddenly through the window as the plane you're in turns to catch the light of the rising sun. After all, I am flying from a distance to come and feel something else embedded in the shadows of our existence. Our eyes may meet, for just a moment. This is, after all, a place for encounters.

What is important is the possibility for true convergence of sensory and emotional capacity, or, what is the closest that we can get to understanding what it is to live as each other?

So today, I want to talk about badgers.

I assign a portion of Charles Foster's book *Being a Beast* in my class, a book that details how a man gives up hunting and with a desire to truly understand animal points of view, lives as a badger, an otter, a fox, a deer, and a swift. When living as a badger for several weeks, he sleeps in a sett and crawls through the woods and cultivates his sense of smell and eats earthworms. I ask my students to write intimately from a different, non-human point of view.

A student remarks, *well it's impossible to write from the point of view of the badger. I don't know anything about badgers. I only know what we can observe.*

I ask, *well, what makes humans easier to write? What makes it so that we think we can so easily understand another human point of view?*

She answers, *because we have the same hardware. So I can imagine what someone else might think.*

*You can imagine what someone else might think because you have observed them. But also because you have made assumptions based on those observations, and based on how **you** have lived in the world, I think.*

This is the point at which I want to ask ourselves to consider the badger.

The badger occupies a very different point of view from a human. It's physical and literal point of view is different, 6 inches from the ground; a human's is 6 feet above the ground. Humans look regularly at the sky for cues on the weather and time of day. Badgers feel moisture in the air, the scent in the dirt unlocked by moisture and temperature. That low to the ground, a badger's world is filled with scent sensory information, we rely primarily on sight.

What I'm going to propose though is that the impossible distance between a human and a badger, that daunting and difficult and impossible divide, all of the differences between a human and a badger, is the same impossible distance between any two humans. But that the similarities between two humans, that which makes us alive and living, that closeness that can be intimated, is the same possible closeness between a human and a badger.

I'm also going to propose that attempting to occupy the point of view of a badger is just as important as the attempt and willingness to occupy the point of view of a different human being other than yourself. If we can consider the similarities between humans and badgers in a way that unites us, both as creatures of this planet, both as creatures that want to live and find intimacy differently but similarly, then we might be able to understand the differences and similarities between humans too.

Because the impossible question always is, how can anyone live inside anyone else's body?

And what, in the context of all these attempts to embody any *other* than yourself, is the difference between sympathy and empathy and understanding and compassion and listening and being and embodying and experiencing and seeing.

If we can see the differences and possibilities of embodying the point of view of a badger, we might also finally understand why it is also impossible to assume the point of view of another human being that is not you, but why both are necessary.

Because what makes a character more *realistic* is not information like their birthday, the color of their nails, what their parents do for a living, the name of their dentist, but rather, what keeps them up at night, what are they afraid of, what do they tell other people they're afraid of, what makes them weep and what inspires them to go on.

To say that something is comparable is not to say that it's the same, of course, the color of a badger's fear is very different than a human's. And yet we both fear. And yet we both persist. Because the closer we are to death, the closer we are to each other and to every other living being in the

world, and closer to the earth itself and perpetual darkness.

The similarities between yourself and a badger, that bind you to a badger, are the same as to what binds you to another human being. And that impossible distance you feel between yourself and that badger, that too is the distance between yourself and another.

Perspective is partially the subjective and embodied interpretation of sensory information.

And power is an accumulation of all the hierarchies we have created via our senses (smell, sight, hearing) and systems of articulation (language). Because we insist on increased simultaneity, we don't know to negotiate each of these hierarchies, or that we can, and therefore are complacent, and that is hegemony. But simultaneity also offers choice. We look at each other. We look at the badger. We can move past looking. We can choose what to look at and what to see and how we want to be in the world. What one sees is tied to how one sees. The sky, of course, has not always been seen as blue.

Charles Foster is a white man who gave up hunting and is now a vegetarian, and in those gestures and the gestures of living as closely as possible as other animals, is genuine in wanting to understand what it means to be a badger, has lived as one, as closely as possible, and has experienced the feeling of chewing earthworms that try to squeeze into the gaps between your teeth. How would the world be different if every white man would embody the lived experience that genuinely of any living creature other than himself? How would the world be different if we all could more closely, consider the badger?

I was afraid of them. I think that had it not been for feeling the proximity of other visitors and the guard, I would not have been bold enough to remain alone with them. "You eat them alive with your eyes, hey," the guard said, laughing; he likely thought I was a little cracked. What he didn't notice was that it was they devouring me slowly with their eyes, in a cannibalism of gold. At any distance from the aquarium, I had only to think of them, it was as though I were being affected from a distance. (which is telepathy)* It got to the point that I was going every day, and at night I thought of them immobile in the darkness, slowly putting a hand out which immediately encountered another. Perhaps their eyes could see in the dead of night, and for them the day continued indefinitely. The eyes of axolotls have no lids.

– from "Axolotl" by Julio Cortázar [*my note]

Change is natural and possible. Charles Foster puts in extreme effort to try and strengthen his sense of smell, his reliance on it, learns to map out terrain with scent rather than sight, learns to turn into fear into desire and to appreciate what the badger appreciates. Desire, like fear, can also be unlearned.

Consciousness isn't necessarily tied to identity, isn't fixed. The ability and possibility to occupy the badger's point of view is also the ability to understand that we can unlearn sight and relearn it, relearn smell, relearn living and dying. That these learnings can then be embodied back into our own bodies.

Have you forgotten what makes you human? The cues of the setting sun. The fear of extremity. The feeling of having no words, just your body to express your pleasure, joy, anger, heartbreak. Have you forgotten what life used to be before you learned language, before you learned the *idea* of life and before you forgot how to really live?