

David Abram – Becoming Raven

David Abram

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Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology

“a book about becoming a two-legged animal entirely a part of the animate world whose life swells within and unfolds all around us....a new way of speaking, one that enacts our interbeing with the earth rather than blinding us to it.”

Becoming Raven – a story from the book

David is in his mid-20's, spent several years in SE Asia doing sleight-of-hand magic and meeting indigenous medicine men. Toward the end of this time he is trekking through the Himalayas with a young Sherpa translator, in search of a certain powerful medicine person – a jhankri – named Sonan. The quest proves to be difficult. Finds the jhankri's parents. Goes to visit the jhankri, but the Sherpa is frightened and they must leave.

David spends 3 months learning the language enough to return on his own. He is able to stay there and learn from Sonan, who has an amazing rapport with Ravens – croaks, squawks, movements – individual ravens.

One day they go to visit a sick person in a village some distance away in the mountains. Returning late in the day, David falls a bit behind Sonan who rounds a bend ahead of him and is out of sight. David hears a raven squawk once, and again, ahead of him somewhere around the bend. When he gets around the bend he sees the raven atop a boulder over the gorge to the left of the trail just ahead of him. The raven squawks, hops twice to get a better view of him, and then hops down on the path. As it does so, it swerves towards him and seems to expand rapidly in size. David throws up his hands to shield himself, but the raven alights in the middle of the trail. Something doesn't look quite right and all of a sudden David realizes that he's been looking at Sonan the whole time.

David then realized how thoroughly Sonan had immersed himself in observation and interaction with those creatures.

David asks Sonan to teach him this. Lessons begin with an exercise to focus on a boulder, not on the surface but inside. Then on a spot between himself and the

boulder. Then to listen to just that spot. Then to practice this with a raven – sinking his gaze into a point midway between the top of the breast and shoulders and hold it there. The focus his sense of touch there.

David is reminded of experiences of listening to conversations at other tables in a crowded restaurant, seeing a skater fall in a rink in Manhattan, and experiencing that in his body. In deep perception senses are informed by other senses.

One morning Sonan tells David that, “This is the day.” He is to watch one particular raven in this deeply perceptive way with all his senses moving into the bird. “Move into the bird,” Sonan says; “Keep your eyes open. Eyes open. Watch.”

The bird is now hopping, not walking, toward the edge of the gorge, and I feel each hop as a slight jolt. Its shoulders expand as wings spread and lift, and then with a lunge we are aloft ... The rim passes under us and the ground falls away into a terrifying emptiness, as the whole canyon opens beneath us. The cliffs just below are glinting silver and pink in the sunlight; they descend in ledges and shelves that expand as we swerve toward them and then tilt away from us into the sky. The horizon angles up sharply and a series of vertical crevasses open and close like pages of a book as we glide past, and then the immensity of the canyon yawns around us with the rush of the rapids far below. A vertigo rises from my belly into my throat and I'm falling. I'm falling. Gonna Die For Sure, but suddenly hear this voice – “Eyes Open!” – and feel Sonan's fingers pressing harder into my left shoulder, and I stretch open my eyes to see more. Now we're following the blue ribbon of water as it gets bigger and wider and louder, its many voices swelling as a freshness fills the whooshing air. I'm gulping for breath as I watch water charging over rocks and spilling around boulders, splitting and rejoining itself over and over again, but now we're swooping faster than the river's flow; the green of a few leaves and then whole trees heaving and sighing just beneath us as we turn (can this be that thicket of rhododendron trees way downriver?) and it feels like we're gonna land here yes oh please please yes but we tilt away and now two other black birds are flapping up outa those trees, calling back and forth. Then cliffs are slanting past and the river's falling away and then the cliffs close by again, then the river, then the cliffs, then the abyss, and I finally realize we're spiraling up the side of the canyon, riding one of the warm updrafts like I've watched ravens do many times. Soon we're above the main gorge, rowing up through air's thickness into a small valley without trees, then tilting out to the valley; flapping hard to rise above a ridge, the air humming around us as we stroke toward the shadowed face of a pyramid that grows rapidly larger and larger, ice fields in its furrows and dark deltas of tumbled rock as this black wall fills our

sight, its upmost angles blurred by mist, until I recognize by some detail the same banner of cloud that I look at every day from far across the canyon, streaming off the top of the peak. We're banking in a wide arc toward the right, and then the vision that opens beneath us shudders through the breast and backbone: glacier-hung mountains upon mountains spreading off into the white distance. A gleaming, glistening world without people...

And I'm balancing, floating utterly at ease in the blue air. As though we're not moving but held, gentle and fast, in the cupped hands of the sky. Stillness. Through a tangle of terrors I catch a first sense of the sheer joy that is flight. Falling, yet perfectly safe. Floating. Floating at the heart of the feathered thickness that is space. Aloft at the center of the world mandala, turning it beneath us, the whole planet rolling this way or that at the whim of our muscles.

The cliffs at the far side of the gorge are now rising to meet us as we dive. Among the rocks scattered near the chasm's edge there's a rectangular boulder we're falling toward. A wisp of smoke is rising from that boulder, evident only as we bank above it. The thought comes that that rock is maybe a house. And there, off past the other rocks toward the edge of the precipice is an odd creature – no, two creatures, two clothed people crouched together on the ground. Their faces are upturned, staring steadily at us even as we glide downward, their heads turning together as the track us perfectly with their gaze. The eyes of one are especially compelling, achingly so, staring straight up into ...

me.