

The Quiet Conversation

On belonging, birds, and the illusion of separation

Sparrows

Beneath the broken guttering, no more than a metre away from where I sit writing, I can hear his chatter — frantic and urgent — through the cracked windowpane. I look up and see the female emerge from the hole to perch on a length of wire I fixed to the downpipe a month ago to keep it attached to the gutter. She vibrates her wings — wings held close to her body — and there is a wild look in her wide eyes. Below the window, the male calls from the wire fence. She swoops down to rest on the post that holds it.

Circling, swooping low above her — back and forth, closer each time — he searches for the perfect flight path. When he lands on the post beside her, he mounts her as she permits him to, and they mate.

Then, chirping together, less frantically now, they fly away.

My camera, always at hand, is already set to a distant focus. Through the sea-salt-dirty, fly-shit-stained, old glass, I capture them. The glass gives the image an atmosphere — a softness like that of an old photograph.

I drink my tea and count another blessing.

And on the subject of blessings...

Forest

I have come to understand more and more about why I feel such an affinity with birds — and the places where they are to be found. After writing those words, I went into the forest to sit quietly on the mossy grass between the pine trees for half an hour of meditation. Watching the treetops dance slowly in the gentle wind, and the blue sky beyond them, I drifted into a beautiful, slow-breathing silence.

Here was peace, in the truest sense of the word. A pair of golden orioles flitted between the branches, foraging and singing as they went. Around me, nature was being — alive, breathing, transforming. And I, sitting on the slightly damp moss, realised that I was a piece of it all: the living nature. I was not outside it, not separate from the place or the moment, for here and now there was no inside or out. No distinctions.

I need these moments — not because they make me a better person or bring enlightenment, but because they return me to reality, to what is fundamental and true. Such moments free me from the illusion — the delusion — that modern culture has built around us: the belief

that endless production and consumption are the purpose of life. A lie, a falsehood that insists I must endlessly achieve, produce, and purchase to have worth.

They are not.

The connection to nature — being nature, or nature being — is the way to being. The Daoists call it Ziran, or “self-so”: harmony with what is, without forcing, without pretence. When I sit like this, I am removed — or perhaps removing myself — from that other great lie: that one is separate from nature.

The system we live in profits through disconnecting us from nature, from one another, and from our own intelligence. It thrives by convincing us that we are incomplete, that we must buy more, own more, do more. It tells us to pursue success, wellness, even peace, through consumption — to believe that striving and buying will make us whole, bring us contentment. Capitalism depends on our dissatisfaction. To want to consume, we must first feel lack; to consume, we must first produce. And so we are trained to serve the system — to bow to the makers of money and mistake their profits for progress.

For eight years, I lived in the Sicilian mountains, off-grid. I live now on an island, much the same way. What I felt there and then, I feel here and now: sitting on the forest floor among trees, birds, bugs, and thorns, surrounded by the smells and sounds of the wind. I am part of something vast and irreplaceable — something eternal and fundamental.

Nature. Dao.

Nature does not need me. But I need it.

So I say yes — not to the voices that measure everything in profit, but to the reality of nature itself. I say yes to the roots, to the song of nature and its quiet intelligence, for it harms no one, profits from no one, and is always there — transforming, honest, alive.

I am not a consumer. I am not a product. I am a breathing part of an ancient conversation between water, earth, air, and sunlight.

The wind carries the song of that conversation, and the birds lead me to the places where I may listen — and join in.

This is who I am.

And who I shall always be.

Life is too short to be anything other than who I am.