

Moments

~ Ulli Diemer ~

Fireworks in the fog

Watching fireworks in the fog may not be your idea of a spectacularly good time. It certainly wasn't mine.

So it was just as well that last Victoria Day Monday, I didn't know just how foggy it was at the waterfront when I headed for Kew Beach to watch the fireworks. Because if I'd known, I probably wouldn't have gone. And I would have missed a special evening.

For foggy it was, and the closer to the lake one got, the foggier it got. But when hundreds of cars are all heading for the same place, it gets rather hard to turn around. So we went.

The beach was alive as I've rarely seen it, especially at night. The boardwalk a river of people flowing to Ashbridges Bay – wherever **that** was, in the fog. The beach itself covered with little clusters of people, setting off their own fireworks displays, lighting small bonfires, drinking hot chocolate against the damp cold, or just watching each other. Kids with sparklers dashing about between the groups.

The smoke, fog, and the erratic lighting provided by the fast-fading scraps of daylight and the clusters of fireworks (when one person ran out, another one somewhere else started up the ones he or she had brought) gave everything a quite unusual, almost eerie, atmosphere. Something between a folk festival and an outtake from *Night of the Living Dead*.

I especially enjoyed the spontaneous character of it all – people weren't passively waiting for the show to start, they **were** the show. There's a bit of the pyromaniac in most of us, so fireworks seem to satisfy a definite need. Especially if we can set them off ourselves. It was a happy crowd.

And when the "official" fireworks started, we all cheered. (We knew they were starting because we could hear them.) If you rushed up closer to the water's edge, as I did, you could even see the fireworks. For those of you who missed them because you stayed at home, or stood a few yards farther back – they were worth seeing. Different than clear-weather fireworks to be sure, but striking in their own right. If it's foggy next year go down anyway .

Today's newspaper

In rural Newfoundland, where my father lives, gas stations frequently also sell groceries, alcohol, and newspapers. In addition to the Corner Brook daily *The Western Star*, you can even get the *Globe and Mail* at a gas station – as long as you are a bit patient, as this overheard conversation indicates:

Customer: Do you have the Globe and Mail?

Clerk: Do you want yesterday's or today's?

Customer: Today's.

Clerk: Then you'll have to come back tomorrow.

A moment on Church Street

Church Street at Maitland in downtown Toronto. I'm on my bicycle, headed west on Maitland, waiting to cross Church Street. Beside me, a man and a small dog are also waiting, and while they wait, they are working out their relationship.

"Sit," the man commands.

The dog ignores him.

"Sit."

The dog looks at him.

More forcefully: "Sit!!"

No response.

Louder still: "Sit!!!"

The dog continues to ignore him.

"OK, fine!" the man says. "Don't sit!"

The light changes, and we all cross.

Mr. Hardass

The surgical waiting at Princess Margaret Hospital. One of my least favourite places in the whole world. A place I know all too well. I've brought a book, but I'm too anxious to read. There are two of us waiting, me, and a man who seems mostly preoccupied with making phone calls related to his business.

Unlike me, he's not anxious in the least, as I learn when he takes a call from his daughter. "No, I'm not worried. There's nothing to worry about, it's purely routine. But you know how your mother is, she's anxious, so I'm here to reassure her."

Listening to him, I start thinking of him as Mr. Hardass. I guess don't actually aspire to be like him, but I wouldn't mind just a bit of his untroubled confidence.

A few minutes later, his wife's surgeon appears. "Everything went well, your wife is fine," the surgeon says – and suddenly finds himself enveloped in a bear hug.

"Oh thank God! Thank you, doctor!" Mr. Hardass is crying. "I was so worried! She's everything to me! She's *everything!*"

Released from the hug, the smiling surgeon departs, and Mr. Hardass rushes off to the recovery room. I am left to wait alone, as anxious as before, but maybe a little wiser.

Creatures of habit and adventurous spirits

The scene: deep underground, on the westbound platform of Bathurst Station on Toronto's subway system. Most of us have made our way down here by entering through the station doors, walking across the station, taking a long staircase down to the subterranean concourse, trudging to the other end of the concourse, and finally taking another long set of stairs down to the platform. There we stand, a patient flock, commuters following our fixed routines, waiting for the next train to come along and take us to accustomed destinations.

Pigeon

One individual on the platform, however, stands out from the tame bunch gazing quietly into space. She – or he, it's hard to tell – has an agenda. Walking this way and that, alert and energetic, she is exploring, picking out details and opportunities the rest of us are oblivious to.

Once I spot her, I watch her for a while, full of admiration for her pluck, her spirit of adventure, and her skill at finding treasures in the unlikeliest places. Then the train arrives, and everyone except her troops on board. I look back and see her continuing her exploration of the platform, comfortable and at home, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for a pigeon to make her living fifty feet underground.

Super Salad

The customer in line in front of me is ordering the lunch special.

Server: “Super-Salad?”

Customer: “Sounds good.”

Server: “Super-Salad?”

Customer: “Yes, sure.”

Server: “But do you want the Super-Salad?”

Customer: “What’s in the Super-Salad?”

Server: “It’s either a bowl of soup, or a salad.”

Ah!

Customer: “What kind of soup is it?”

Mercifully, another server is ready to take my order. Coffee, with milk.

A moment at La Festa

I’m waiting for a slice of pizza at La Festa, the pizza place across the street from my office, chatting with the owner. She’s originally from Eritrea, now settled in Canada. There’s a TV up on the wall behind the counter, currently showing scenes from Eritrea. As one can see, it’s sunny and hot in Eritrea. It’s bitterly cold outside here in Toronto, and the sun is nowhere to be seen.

She sighs. “Ah, I miss Eritrea.” A long pause. “But I don’t miss the dictatorship.”

A moment in the polling station

I'm in the queue waiting to vote in the advance poll in the federal election. I'm ambivalent, as always when I vote, since I don't support any of the political parties, but I want to get the vile Harper Conservatives out. From the snatches of conversation I hear, getting rid of the Conservatives is a widely shared wish.

The wait is fairly long, and the Elections Canada people are doing what they can to make the experience as pleasant as possible. There are chairs for those who need them, and, for the kids, they have an unofficial 'ballot box.' Those who are old enough to be able to write can write a name on a piece of paper, and then put their 'ballot' in the box. Those too young to write can choose a marker to colour their paper with. The coloured 'ballots' also go into the box.

Behind me, a little girl asks her father, "What colour should I choose?" "Any colour you like," he replies. Pause. "As long as it's not blue*."

We smile at each other. "Got to teach them young," he says.

[*Blue is the colour of Canada's right-wing Conservative party, which went on to defeat in the October 19, 2015 election.]

A puzzling moment in the park

A woman is playing with her dog. It's a friendly tail-wagging German Shepherd, excited by their game of fetch, tugging on the stick in her hand, impatiently waiting for the next throw.

"When you start approaching the final stages," she tells it, "you start to lose focus, and that's when you get into trouble."

I'm bemused. I know that German Shepherds are quite intelligent, but even so this seems like awfully sophisticated feedback to be giving a dog. And anyway, the dog seems very focused indeed.

The woman continues speaking. I realize that she talking to someone on the phone. Presumably not a dog.

The German Shepherd runs happily after the stick, and I too trot on my way.

A theological moment

I'm walking to work along Bloor Street this morning. Two guys are smoking in a doorway. One of them stops me: "Excuse me. My friend and I, we are having a discussion. Do you know, what is purgatory?"

I reply: "Yes, it's where you go when you aren't good enough to go straight to heaven, but not bad enough to go to hell. It is an in-between place, sort of like jail, where you stay for a period of time, and then when you have served your time, you go to heaven."

Guy: "So you do go to heaven after?" He looks meaningfully at his friend.

"Yes," I reply. "If you believe in that kind of thing."

They seem happy with my answer. I go on my way.

A moment on Queen Street

A man is standing in front of a store he wants to enter. However, a sign on the door says "No Entry without a Mask." He doesn't have a mask. What to do?

Another man walks out of the store at that moment. He's wearing a mask. "Hey," says the first man, "Can I borrow your mask for a minute?"

No luck. The other man doesn't want to share.

Strange Sounds Up in the Trees

I'm sitting out back reading (Uncle Tungsten, by Oliver Sacks) but I find I'm being distracted by the sounds coming from up in the trees above my head. Usually I have some idea of what I'm hearing from up above – swifts, robins, cardinals, sparrows, squirrels, cicadas later in the summer – but these sounds I can't place. They're just weird: a combination of whistles, clacking sounds, chuckling, rattling, in no particular sequence that I can make out, and certainly not musical.

Finally I grab my binoculars and have a look. Two birds, darkish. It's not so easy to recognize a bird when it's 30 feet up and you're directly below it. Not for me, anyway. Hmmn, yellow bills. Aha: starlings. Since they have yellow bills, I presume they are adults, since the young have dark bills. They're sitting on separate branches, but occasionally one hops onto the branch the other is on. Some kind of mating behaviour? That seems possible, but they don't seem to be actually *doing* anything.

I look them up. My Peterson guide says they are "garrulous." That they are. Another bird book tells me that starlings are "monogamous," their version of monogamy being that they stick with one partner until they pick a new one. Yeah, OK.

So maybe they're discussing the pros and cons of raising another brood? Or maybe they just enjoy sitting around making weird noises? I don't know.

This seems to be the story of my life: I see things, but I don't really know what's happening, or why. It wasn't always like this: when I was 20, I knew everything. Since then, life has been a constant journey of discovery: that is, discovering how much there is to know, and how little I know.

The mosquitoes drive me inside. Back to Oliver Sacks.

Social distancing

A certain three-year-old very near and dear to my heart came by for a visit today, with his father. Of course, the rules around social distancing need careful thinking about these days, and it's sometimes difficult for us grown-ups to figure them out, so it's helpful to have a three-year-old skilled in the use of Socratic questioning ("B" in the account below) to guide you in the right direction.

The visit started out front, me standing on the steps, them down below.

B: Can we go to the backyard?

Dad: OK, we can do that.

[in the backyard]

B: Can I go on the deck?

Dad: No, we have to stay below for social distancing. Ulli will be on the deck.

[90-second interval]

B: Can I sit on the bottom step?

Dad: OK, you can sit on the bottom step.

[60-second interval]

B: Can I sit on this step? (second step)

Dad: OK, you can sit on the second step.

[60-second interval]

B: Can I sit here? (top step/edge of deck)

Dad: OK, you can sit there.

[90-second interval]

B: Can I walk on the deck?

Dad: OK, you can walk on it, on this side.

[60-second interval]

B: Can I put my chair on the deck?

Dad: OK.

[30-second interval]

B: Can Ulli come sit beside me?

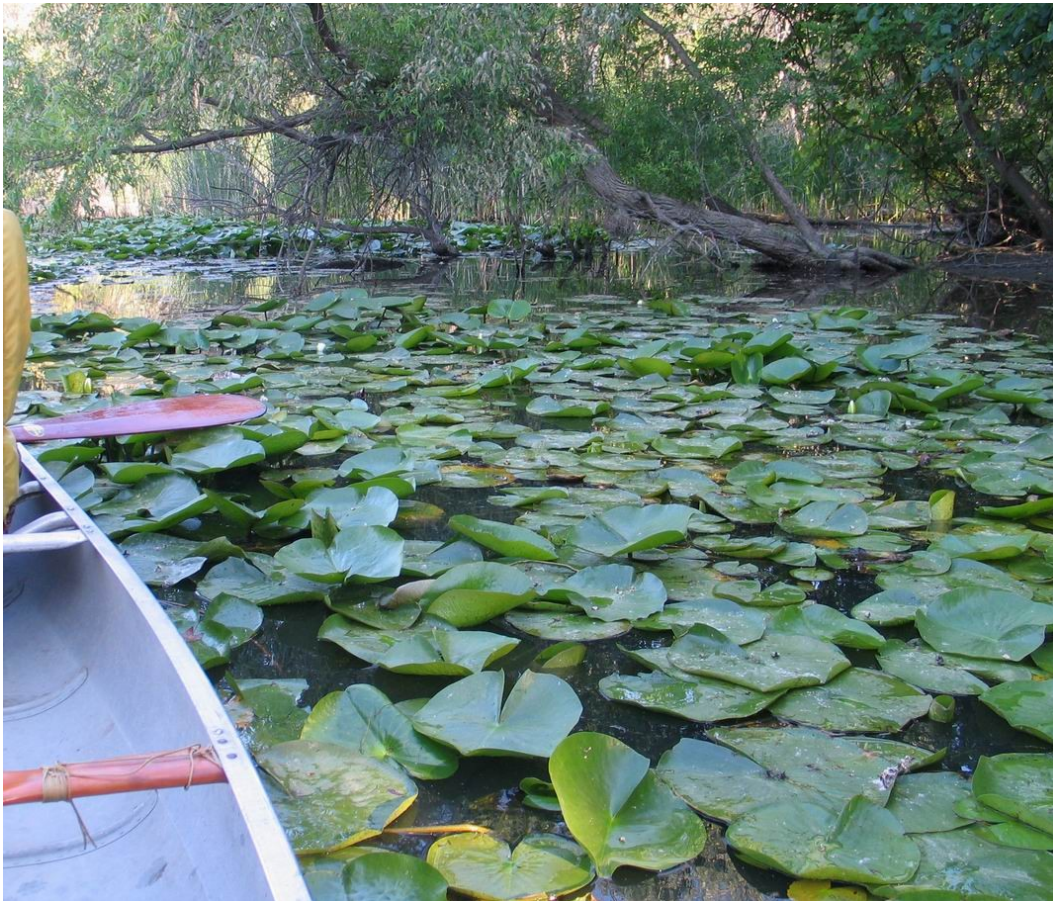
Dad: Oh, OK.

Time to achieve goal: six-and-a-half minutes.

An evening paddle

Went canoeing on the Humber River with a friend yesterday evening. We paddled the river and explored the marshes. Saw egrets, great blue heron, grebes, wood ducks, mallards, Canada geese, mute swans, red-winged blackbirds, swallows. Cormorants, gulls, and terns were diving for fish. A highlight was a kingbird nest in a branch above the water, the young with their mouths wide open, the busy parents flying back and forth bringing them insects.

That's one of the wonderful things about being in a canoe: you can go places you can't approach in a car or even on foot, moving quietly or staying still in one spot. Life slows down, and you can breathe.



Butterfly

Standing on the front walk with my neighbour, I'm trying to find words, but what is there to say? Her daughter died yesterday. In the face of her grief, I have nothing to offer except my presence and feeble words of sympathy.

It wasn't so long ago that we were standing on this same spot: I was the one who had lost my beloved, also to breast cancer, and my neighbour was trying to find words of comfort.

My neighbour knows, as do I, that life and death, love and grief, walk hand in hand. She is 92 years old, her husband died more than 20 years ago, and still, every Valentine's Day, she visits his grave.

Lives end, but life goes on. When she goes back inside, I see a Monarch butterfly flitting around the milkweed plants in the front yard. I hope she is looking for a spot to lay her eggs. A woman is walking by with her young daughter. They stop: the mother points to the butterfly and the milkweed and explains what is happening. The daughter is listening and watching intently.

I smile, despite my sadness. Life goes on.



White-throated Sparrow

I've been hearing a white throated sparrow out back for the last couple of days. They have been stopping over in the backyard (in downtown Toronto), for a few days every spring for as long as I can remember, certainly more than a decade. It seems a bit mysterious: can they live that long? Do they migrate with their young and tell them: "Remember this place: it's a good place to stop?"

They seem to be arriving earlier. Last year, they were here on May 3. In 2016, it was May 10. I hope that's OK; they need to be synchronized with their food sources: insects, seeds, berries.

I've also learned that some of them have developed a new variation of their song. It was first heard in B.C. in 1999 (I guess cultural innovation often starts on the west coast), and started to be heard in Ontario five years ago. I'm not good enough to be able to tell if this one is singing the old song or the new variation.

I just know that I'm pleased when I hear them: a brief but precious visit.



Down at the lake

Down at the lake
Redwings announce their arrival
Winter ducks prepare to leave
A beaver takes a leisurely swim
And grebes loudly declare their passion.
Spring!

