
Unraveling mystery

The following is an excerpt from an interview with Darrell Calkins, soon to be published and available on the website.

“A perennial question that everyone seems to want to know about you is, ‘What’s your background?’ Both in terms of the typically combative, ‘who the hell are you to say/do the things that you do,’ as well as those who are curious as to the heritage that is coming down to us through you.”

My background is somewhat eclectic. In my early teens, I began to take interest in various Eastern schools of thought—Buddhism, yoga, Sufism, and the philosophies behind Chinese and Japanese martial arts. At the same time, I was in a catholic high school run by the Christian Brothers, so I had a fairly deep religious training. My studies at school focused mainly on theater, as a playwright, actor and director. I started my own theater group at 15, the same age I began lecturing through a public speaking program at a nearby college.

I jockeyed back and forth with all of these for a few years before really focusing on mastering the physical arts. That took me to a lot of places: Kung Fu and Tai Chi, Aikido, classical ballet, basic physiology and biology, endurance training and running, and again, yoga. I had the right genes and a lot of energy, so I eventually made my way up through the ranks and got to work with some elite teachers.

In my twenties, I traveled to the Orient, became serious about Zen Buddhism and Chinese and Japanese martial arts. I spent some extended time in a couple of monasteries. Back in the States, I studied Western philosophy, psychology and literature at Cal Berkeley and Yale, largely auditing postgraduate courses.

Through all this, I was basically following my instincts. I didn’t really have a single teacher or discipline that eclipsed the others. My luck was in meeting extraordinary individuals in each of the disciplines I studied, mainly those who had really given their life to their chosen art. And I understood that I was looking for a central theme or essence to all this. What’s the driving force behind these disciplines? What are people looking for? What am I looking for?

In terms of a heritage, I'm probably not sufficiently certified to be an accurate representative of any of the given disciplines above. My experience and interests are too wide-ranging. In recent years, my focus has turned toward the natural sciences, for example. I know a lot about falcons.

So, who the hell am I to say and do what I do? Nobody. Just a man trying to make the most of my time on the planet. If I'm succeeding in passing down some heritage, I hope it's just this essential force, a love of questioning and engaging. Keeping that alive.

“How has this eclectic background led you to do what you do? How did teaching arise as a way of life? More specifically, how, for example, does something like your extensive knowledge about falcons emanate from and inform what you do? And while we’re on the subject: what exactly do you do?”

I don't really consider myself to be a teacher, although I understand that others do. There's a certain restriction or reduction in that stereotype that doesn't ring true. Especially the underlying assumption that I know something that others don't, and my job is to give them what I know. That's simply not true.

My personal experience in doing what I do is more along the lines of following the questioning, or, more precisely, the questing of others. To do that correctly, it's essential that I don't provide an answer that ends the quest, but rather, that I somehow aid in making that quest more functional, clear and fulfilling. Part of that involves engaging in a dialogue to facilitate cleaning out unworkable habits and misperceptions. But most of it is just being authentically interested in the individual I'm working with. That builds a common trust, from which a shared process of real exploration can take place.

“we already know way too much, but don't know what to do with it.”

Beyond that, I'm a big fan of the idea that we already know way too much, but don't know what to do with it. Beneath all that is a soul searching for how to have fun, in the deepest sense of the word, and how to cause fun for others. I try to assist in a process to relocate that and live according to it. For each of us, that's completely unique. To find exactly what that is in each individual has little or nothing to do with teaching.

“Evolution seems to be your central theme or organizing principle. Where does evolution fit in your view of the world and how the world works? Do you use it as a metaphor because it is commonly known or as a metaphor because you find it powerful? Or is it perhaps your unconscious belief system?”

Yes, it's mainly just a good open-ended, somewhat neutral metaphor. Terms like *spirituality*, *human potential*, *personal growth*, or even *happiness* and *attainment* or others all have common restrictions and personalities, causing more likelihood of, “Oh, yeah, I know what he means.” And they're less accurate. I'm not using the term as in the Darwinian scenario, but more as in its origin: unrolling or unraveling.

It may be a belief, but as I see it, yes, that's the name of the game. Unraveling mystery. Some of that is external and some of it is internal. I can think of nothing in the universe that does not abide by this essential principle. I'm simply transposing it to the specifics of the human being. We do have some capacity to determine how things evolve, and how *we* evolve, individually and as a community or race. That's a tremendous freedom and a tremendous responsibility.

“You implied that various religious, philosophical and spiritual traditions carry a lot of baggage, I assume from the originators and followers, and the onlookers. I see evolution as equally loaded, including the ‘scientific view’ as well as those who use it to answer the traditional questions of where did things come from, is there meaning to life, who cares, etc. I would like a follow up to your last two sentences. Do you believe we have the capacity to influence our evolution or even the evolution beyond ourselves beyond rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic? Or, if we have little impact, should we act ‘as if’ we did because it makes us feel good?”

“yes, that's the name of the game. Unraveling mystery.”

There is, no doubt, as you suggest, some reaction to the term *evolution*. I've found that usually what I'm up against in terms of prejudice or presumption are terms that are more commonly used and nice. I try to cut through the scientific association by specifying *personal evolution*. The majority of persons that don't know me and are introduced to my work come from angles of self-reflection and self-betterment, usually via schools of religion, spirituality, psychology or other forms of therapy. Personal evolution makes some sense, it's close in spirit, but usually avoids immediate categorization.

In any case, I'm not attached to the word, and am open to better ideas. Do you have one? Perhaps *unfolding* is better? Sounds to me like something you'd do to a deck chair.

On your last question... Various human abuses resulted in reducing the total number of Peregrine falcons on the planet thirty years ago to dangerously low levels, where extinction seemed highly probable. A few, and only a few, individuals noticed this and studied the causes. After a long battle to get that information out and instigate necessary changes, a corner was turned and, very slowly, the momentum changed directions. Now the breed is doing well.

My wife was an innocent observer in my own studies and work with falcons. Eventually, she pursued various opportunities to meet, hold and study falcons close up. Those experiences remain an unending source of inspiration and joy for her, and provided an obvious and permanent shift in her perceptions and experience of life itself, which has since influenced experiences of others. All of that was caused by noticing and engaging the elements of influence—choosing for things to unfold in a specific direction and not another or no direction.

On a more profound internal dimension, we survive largely because of the existence and recognition of high-end qualities—compassion, integrity, courage, humility, etc.

These are how we perceive spirit. Even the most cynical and fatalistic bastard will snap out of self-absorption, abuse and hopelessness when confronted by an extreme expression of any one of these qualities. (Case studies show that this also applies even to rapists and murderers, not always, but more so than any other technique or therapy.) That is, beyond belief, the desire to feel good, or even hope or despair, there does exist an essential intuitive value system in each of us. This runs through and across every culture, and even every species. I don't believe that those intuitive values are there to fool us into occupying ourselves so as to feel good while waiting for the inevitable to happen. Nature is not so decadent. Or cynical.

It takes choice and sacrifice to develop these qualities. This itself is the act of creation and personal evolution. Rarely do they happen by accident. We can equally choose to not develop them, to not evolve, at least at this time in history. We suffer and cause suffering when we don't, but that's not the ultimate reason for doing so. Whether or not we personally do impact some ultimate evolution beyond ourselves, we can definitely influence what happens today. To choose to waste a day, or a lifetime, is opposed to the essential spirit of life, expressed, sacrificed for, and upheld through every perceivable interaction in nature. It's also opposed to every human expression of spirit throughout history. We know to live up to our potential, to fulfill the trust of creation by moving forward, even if we don't believe it or feel like it or know why.

“there does exist an essential intuitive value system in each of us.”

As an aside, the Titanic is a good metaphor. Notice that there were some survivors, new ship construction techniques developed because of it, lots of excellent stories (some involving the qualities listed above), a heightened ethic on peripheral perception and responsibility in some related areas, and the chance to see Kate Winslet topless in the film, so not all was lost. Some evolution came as a result of it, and that was a choice.

Darrell Calkins
June 2005

Comments

Thank you for your comments about the May issue of CobaltSaffron. Excerpts from a few we received:

“...my deepest admiration for ‘Life Relevantly Lived’...as you have here so eloquently embodied the very thing you express, engaging with passion and a humble curiosity as well as with a warrior principle of outraged ethos the imagination you celebrate to transform an oppositional and destructive assail into a living articulation of imagination so compelling as itself to become a functional implementation of the framed paradigm...”

E. D., South Carolina.

“I love the way you took what feels like a sense of legitimate anger both at the author and, moreover, at the world which produces such thinking (along with what I’d imagine to be a strong temptation to utterly ridicule both) and transformed it into a hymn to the creative impulse. To watch you take something like this and from it craft a thing of beauty—beauty in the sense of that which leads us back to the best part of ourselves—is nothing less than inspiring.”

K. K., California.

Upcoming events:

Getting Your Ass Over the Bar

June 25 & 26, Los Angeles

Enduring Essentials for Living Well (in an unwell world)

July 9 & 10, San Francisco

CobaltSaffron

A FREE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

Concept, design and editing: John Mitchell, Isabelle Calkins, Karen Strassman

We welcome questions, comments and complaints.

www.CobaltSaffron.com

Copyright © 2005 Darrell Calkins. All Rights Reserved.

No part of this newsletter may be reproduced or transmitted in any form.