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Meeting the Gray Fox

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Cover Page Footnote

"Meeting the Gray Fox" by Pablo Deustua Jochamowitz, from *Nature Love Medicine: Essays on Wildness and Wellness*, edited by Thomas Lowe Fleischner, appears courtesy of Torrey House Press [edited anew for IJE].



Meeting the Gray Fox

Pablo Deustua Jochamowitz*

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Prologue and Post Script to the Reprint “Meeting the Gray Fox”

The doorbell rings. I walk to the door and open it with a slight feeling of apprehension. Claudia is in front of me. We say hello, two meters apart from each other. We cannot see the expressions on each other’s faces, which are partially covered by our masks. Hers, light blue. Mine, white. I can mentally picture, however, that under Claudia’s mask her familiar smile is still there. I know she will not see my smile either, but I smile at her anyway.

We walk to the office where we have met so many times in the past and where Claudia has shared so much of herself. This time, however, this room looks different. Our seats are carefully positioned to maintain a two-meter safety distance. Beside Claudia’s seat, completely covered with a paper towel to prevent infections, stands a table with a bottle of hydro-alcoholic gel which she must use to disinfect her hands.

We stay silent, with our faces covered. Between us there is a window that, accordingly to health authorities, must stay wide open: it is essential that air flows, thus minimizing the chances of infection.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, six months ago, we have all become used to conducting our daily lives according to a series of restrictions that will increase our safety. In this context, almost every human interaction has turned into a rigid protocol of precaution and lack of spontaneity. What happens inside the therapy office is no exception.

The window is still open and the fresh autumn air seeps into the office, purifying us in every possible way. I look up, between the branches of a tree which grows parallel to the wall of my building. The sky is deep blue. I notice, up in the air, a couple of swallows which are surely under way to their southerly migration.

And I can't help but wonder: What's the point of being here in this office? What sense does it make that two people, who want to work with their whole souls, with honesty, flexibility and spontaneity, are sitting here with half their faces covered with a mask and feeling a rigidity of body and mind that make it very difficult for honest and lively speech to arise? Today more than ever, in the middle of the Coronavirus pandemic, I recall the therapeutic work with Paul, outside in nature. I firmly advocate getting out of these four walls and connecting with the life and spontaneity that awaits us out there, which, I am sure, will bring out the most essential of our inner world, the marrow of life, as Henry Thoreau wisely declared.



*How does it feel?
How does it feel?
To be on your own
With no direction home
A complete unknown
Like a rolling stone. . .*

Bob Dylan

Paul arrives on time. I am struck by the slowness of his movements and the blankness of his face. I imagine this young man carrying an invisible backpack full of stones that curves his back. He takes the chair across from me. “I am dead inside,” he says. “Nothing seems interesting, nothing captures my enthusiasm . . . I feel dead . . . I am dead and utterly lost.” Hard words to hear, particularly from a young person, with all life and possibilities ahead.

Paul is twenty-five years old. He finished his university degree in political science two years ago with extraordinary qualifications. I ask how long he has been feeling like this, and his answer shocks me: “Since I was ten years old, I think.” It is not easy to follow Paul’s words: his somnolence and lack of energy spreads all over the therapy room and I also start feeling tired and sleepy. I make an effort, though, and keep enquiring about his life. “What happened in your teens?” I ask. “Nothing in particular,” he answers. Everything was supposedly okay. He had friends, dated three girls, received good grades. “People loved me, everyone loved me. I usually heard I was a role model for everyone, that I always did what I had to do, the right thing, on time, the proper way . . . as everyone expected.”

In our second meeting, I ask Paul about his last thought of the previous session—that he had always been a role model, and had always done what he was supposed to do. Something changes in the expression on his face. “I remember much of my childhood . . . I enjoyed a lot, I felt light . . . without pressure . . . free, flexible.”

I ask, “What changed? You couldn’t keep walking light . . . what happened?”

He keeps silent and seems anxious. I stay there, waiting for whatever he wants to share. “I started to feel extremely pressured to be someone . . . to be someone intelligent, to be the best. I didn’t know what ‘to be someone ’ meant, but I felt the heavy pressure on my shoulders . . . this pain in my back . . . this oppression . . . like a black hole inside my stomach. I didn’t know what was happening to me. I was scared . . . I’m scared. I don’t feel I am myself anymore. Who am I? Where is my essence, my essence. . .?”

His words are so intense and I feel something very real in his speech. It is like something deep within Paul awakens to life through those words. I hear a hint of a rebellion within them—a rebellion against what, I wonder.

I have no answers to offer, but I believe something needs to be said: “Paul . . . I have the feeling that you want to rebel against something or someone, you want to disobey . . . you need to break the rules and to be released from some kind of heavy chains.” He remains silent. I can see him breathing uneasily, his gaze wandering rapidly from one spot of the ceiling to another. He nervously clutches the lapels of his shirt. “I can’t take this anymore. I can’t take this anymore.” He is sobbing—an uncontrollable crying, wild, full of rage. There is pain in that cry, of course, but there is also truth and an honest connection with himself. I let him cry for all the time he needs. I keep him company, silently. I feel words are not necessary.

Eventually, he continues. “Everything went wrong when I started growing up. I remember thinking to myself: ‘I want to be a small boy forever.’ But it didn’t happen, of course . . . the child went away, sadly. I felt compelled to be the best, to be a winner. I couldn’t fail. And everything I did . . . I do . . . it must be the best. I have no option . . . the best. Sometimes I wasn’t able to start anything new since I was so scared of failing. It was very difficult to accept I was not the best. Everything was competition. My friends weren’t my friends anymore . . . they were competitors and I was supposed to beat them. I was told I needed to get the best grades, that I needed to win. That was the only option. I was told the world is very competitive and I needed to be prepared. That was the only way I could get what I needed to get. And people will love you for what you get . . . success . . . success . . . the road to success. If you are not on it, no one will care about you. And I’ve been driving that road the best I can. And I’m supposedly driving fine. I am winning . . . but I can’t keep with this. I feel I am dying. I am chained, gagged, numbed. This is not me . . . this is not my essence. And this is the only road I know . . . and I am lost.”

When Paul leaves my office, I am bewildered. There is something—an inner voice of intuition—that tells me I will need to approach him in a different way, not from my classical psychoanalytical technique: elaborating interpretations and bringing theoretical explanations about his suffering will bring no help at all. I am sure of that. I start feeling restless, so I stand up and start moving my body . . . head, arms, legs. I feel oppressed here. The air is not fresh; the space is so small, so confined. I feel like a caged cat and have the urge to run, to go outside. Suddenly, like a violent flash, full of energy, heat and electricity, a quote from Henry Thoreau appears in my mind:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.

Then, I knew: we must leave the four walls of the office. I will walk with Paul on a journey to find his “marrow of life,” the essence that might enable him to reconnect with the person he truly is. We must go, like Thoreau, to the forest.

When we meet again, I suggest a walk through the pine forests of the *Sierra de Guadarrama*, an hour away from Madrid, the city where we both live. Paul seems surprised, clearly not expecting this. I think: ‘Good start—surprise is something he desperately needs!’ There is something fresh and new in this proposal, something which does not fit the traditional therapeutic method. I keep thinking, rapidly: ‘Leave the traditional, he’s been so traditional and he’s suffered a lot. He needs a rebellion, a good rebellion.’ I hear Lou Reed’s words: ‘take a walk on the wild side . . . take a walk on the wild side.’ I really feel the forest will help Paul to take this step into unknown territory where he can find his own path.

I say to him, “We will just walk and look, we will move and breathe . . . don’t think about it. You have thought too much for so long.”

Three days later we meet in *Cercedilla*, a small village at the foot of the Sierra. I deliberately didn’t state instructions for this “session,” so we silently start walking towards unmapped territory, inner and outer. We need not get anywhere—no goals, no time, no destination. It’s only us and the rumors of nature. I can feel Paul calm, watchful and curious. His face shows a childlike expression, a mixture of naughtiness, excitement and fear. I tell him to let all control go away and to feel free to do whatever he wants—in the way and time he wants. He nods. The forest greets us.

We walk uphill, under the towering Scots Pines. A gentle wind blows against our faces. It’s October and this cool air is welcome after the warmest summer in thirty years. The absence of human-made

sounds (words, whisperings, music, cars, different machines) is extraordinary. The rhythmic sound of our footsteps on the carpet of pine needles becomes absolutely hypnotic. Paul stops, always silent. Slowly he drops to his knees and grabs a handful of needles with both hands. Eyes closed, hands to his face. I can hear him breathe deeply: one, two, three, four times. And again, this time even more deeply: one, two, three, four. He opens his eyes, and says, “What a smell. It moves me inside . . . so fresh and clean. My lungs are expanded as much as they can be. There’s something good here, within this scent. God . . . I’m breathing . . . I’m breathing.”

Little has to be said from my side. I don’t want to break his moment with words and thoughts and audacious psychological interpretations full of intellectual knowledge. No, I’m positive: this is another universe. Under these pines words just don’t work as they do in the therapy room.

He keeps silent, not kneeling anymore but in a more comfortable position, half lying. I decide to sit, a couple of meters away. The sounds of the forest wrap and haunt us. The wind blows through the branches of the pine trees, as if they were rustic guitar strings, creating a very special melody. The Short-toed Treecreepers blithely sing. I watch Paul staring at a column of ants climbing the trunk of a pine tree. I think to myself, “No one judges you here, Paul, no one expects anything from you. Feel free and light. You don’t have to prove or do anything special. You just need to be. So simply be, my friend, as the Short-toed Treecreeper is being now, so distant from ideals and ideas about what should be done. It doesn’t matter: the treecreeper just lives and takes everything as it is. No judgment. No assessment. No rationality.”

I am about to explain this idea to Paul but, happily, I refrain. Stop, I say to myself. We are not in the therapy room. This is wordless territory.

Paul is looking, smelling, touching, listening, being . . . just like the Short-toed Treecreeper. That’s all he needs now. Let nature heal him. You don’t need to say anything, I tell myself. You don’t need to play the brilliant psychotherapist. Just be here and witness this healing encounter between Paul and the forest.

Paul’s words start to flow: “I am feeling different . . . it is an odd kind of feeling. I am a bit scared, anxious because this is so unknown. But I am okay with this . . . this is fresh air. I need to get used to breathing this fresh air. I’m not used to it and . . . well, you know . . . this fresh feeling of nobody expecting anything from me. I always have to perform in order to satisfy everyone—not anymore. I’m not feeling that here, in these woods. It is so easy. I don’t need to act, I just need to let this happen. Look at those ants going up and down . . . I had this idea: they will keep living and doing their ant stuff with no care of what I perform or don’t perform. I know it is very difficult to understand, but it feels so liberating, so true and honest.”

Once again, nothing to say from my side. I just need to allow the landscape to keep the dialogue with Paul, with its own order and flow.

After a few minutes, he speaks softly. “I can hear a murmur in the distance . . . I’ve just realized that.” He shows a deep concentration, as if the murmur was the most important thing in the world to pay attention to. “I believe it is water,” he concludes. We rise and walk following the water’s whisper.

Now, we face a creek that descends from a hillside full of pines. The crystal water hits against the rocks, forming eddies and foam. I think to myself, “This is meltwater, coming from five-hundred meters above us.” I can feel the chill and the power this water has to awaken anyone from the deepest sleep or drowsiness. I mentally visualize Paul—the Paul who came to see me at my office

the first time—diving within this chilly element and calmly waking up from lethargy, coming back to life.

The creek roar surrounds our bodies. We remain silent, mesmerized by the singing and dancing of water among the stones. I had never felt this intensity within the walls of the therapy room and I know nothing could be better now than this wordless moment among nature.

Time has stopped, one more time. Paul speaks, but I feel he is not addressing me, but the whole landscape. “I will never see it again—that small leaf the water is dragging . . . never. It is gone now.”

I hesitate to say something. I am not sure if I am really following what he wants to express. But suddenly, an idea shows up and I feel I need to give it voice: “It is true, more than true. Never again. Never again. That leaf is gone, forever . . . forever. Can you see it? Do you realize how special, how unique that moment was? What a gift! You were the only witness. You and the trees around us. And you are not asked to give anything back, you are not required to pay for it or to perform any role. You don’t have to pretend to be something you’re not. You just have to be here, and look, and smell and listen. Just that.”

The words are coming from my mouth with no thought, with no aim. I trust they must be said. Like Paul, I am perplexed by my feelings. I have been trained to think, to understand, to analyze as a therapist in order to help my patients. But this is another story. This has nothing to do with analysis, thinking, and the rational mind. These are the Scot Pines, and the Short-toed Treecreepers, and the group of ants, and the creek acting as medicine, helping Paul and helping me. Humbled, I have utterly abandoned the pressure to act as the almighty therapist who must guide his patient to health. I feel relieved, light and free, as Paul feels. We are two simple human beings letting the forest cure us.

The following week, Paul opens the door to my office five minutes before schedule. I feel he is restless, maybe anxious. But I sense a different kind of anxiety this time. There is something new going on with him—I can feel vitality and eagerness to start talking. “Something has happened since we were in the woods last week. Something new—so new it makes me feel like I have to learn everything from the very beginning. Actually, it feels like I am starting to know myself from the very beginning, from my true beginning, from my essence.” While he is speaking, I recall the water roar in the woods, and I feel he is roaring with life too. “I feel . . . I feel I will start to see myself directly in the eye. No more stories, no more lies to myself, no more.” He keeps going: “This backpack full of heavy rocks I have been carrying for so many years . . . well, it is time to take the rocks out of it one by one. I still have plenty of them, but I have already taken a few out. So difficult to express with words, this feeling . . . this feeling . . . I don’t need words.”

Never before in my experience as a psychotherapist had I witnessed such a radical change. And not just his words—I was deeply impressed by the look on his face, the rhythm of his breathing, the whole of his body language. Every feature communicated lightness, open space, fresh air, freedom. I tell myself: that’s my job—to help my patients find their own way to feel free and to live with lightness.

But in Paul’s case I am positive it was the forest—not me—that helped him.

What happened to allow this spectacular release of his emotional burdens? One thing is obvious: direct and attentive observation of nature was key. My mind wanders: Nature . . . wild nature with its own laws, with its own order, so different from the regular way we use to lead our lives—speeding, planning, being productive, self-controlled, rational, analytic, competitive . . . such a

different order! Nature has a different way, a wild way. Wild nature. The word ‘wild’ rumbles inside my head and heart. Then, I remember Gary Snyder’s The Practice of the Wild. I rush to my library and take the book from the shelf.

Letters and phrases dance in front of my astonished eyes. Everything fits now. Like a solved puzzle, Snyder’s words help me come to understand what went on with Paul last week in the woods: “Nature is not a place to visit, it is home.” For both Paul and I, our walk under the pines was a return home, to our true instincts, our true nature. One thing is doubtlessly true: our origin as humans is in nature, not in culture, and this is a forgotten fact—or repressed, as psychoanalysis would state.

I clutch the book, full of emotions. Among Snyder’s descriptors of “wild individuals” as free, spontaneous, unconditioned, expressive, and playful. I feel so connected to Paul while reading Snyder. I am picturing Paul’s suffering all these years: he was deeply wounded by the imprisonment of his wild being, which for so long was chained, domesticated, forced to follow a set of rules and precepts that were not his. The *shoulds* and *musts*, the pressure to be a role model, suffocated him. Our walk under the pines—our coming back home—unlocked the door and released Wild Paul.

The adventure continues for both of us. We will keep going home, to the woods, in search of our “marrow of life.” We will keep visiting the Scot Pines and the Short-toed Treecreepers to cultivate our wild essence, which, according to Snyder, is like “a gray fox trotting off through the forest, ducking behind bushes, going in and out of sight.” Paul’s gray fox, and my own gray fox, appeared suddenly and charmingly that wonderful day in the forest and became our guides.

Let’s each go to the forest—silently and in awe—to find our own gray fox. Our true essence and health are there, waiting for us.

Deustua-Fox
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