

# Spinning with Raven

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We tend to assume that a mystery is a problem that needs to be solved. Your car is making a strange noise, so you take it to the car repair person who can solve the mystery and make the problem go away. You read a good mystery story because it invites you to get involved in the details of some perplexing crime that a clever detective is able to solve only after many labyrinthine twists and turns. Sometimes, however, a mystery can't be solved. And sometimes we shouldn't try.

The scenic part of the road had ended. The red canyon walls that had jutted up on the right had angled down to a scatter of rock. The blue-green Colorado River that rolled and roiled on the left side of the road had surged round a bend and was visible no more. Now, both sides of the two-lane road from just past Moab, Utah to Grand Junction, Colorado had ceased winding and aimed straight ahead. On either side broad fields stretched flat and sandy, except where an irrigation sprinkler as long as a city block shot towers of aquifer water over emerald monocultures.

I was on my way to the airport after co-guiding a ten-day wilderness program that included a three-day solo. It is intense work being a guide, and I was feeling exhilarated, exhausted, and eager to get home. My plan was to arrive at the airport early, drop off the rental car, and settle down with a book before my flight. So when I passed a patch of barren ranchland on the right and felt a tug of allurements, I wasn't really in the mood to respond. I glanced over, deemed the place uninteresting, and sped on.

For the next seven miles, however, I couldn't stop thinking about that impulse to stop. I usually pay attention to what I think of as "the world's invitations," for they often lead to magic: important encounters, wondrous sights, a fork in the road I never knew I was looking for until I turned down it and realized it was going to make a difference to my entire life. What was I missing, I wondered, by ignoring



this call? I had plenty of time, after all. I made a U-turn.

A fourteen-mile round trip had not improved the aesthetics of the place. Nevertheless, I pulled off the road and got out of the car. The vegetation was low and sparse, and the sandy soil was littered with cow prints and flat, dried manure. About a hundred feet back from the road, the land sloped slightly downward. I ventured over to the rim. A few old and bedraggled cottonwood trees were holding on in difficult terrain. They looked like they missed the creek that probably

flowed seasonally through this parched valley, but of which there was no sign now. Evidence of cattle etched the land into the distance, but no animals had been there recently. I went back to the car and turned the ignition.

And again, I just couldn't leave. I kept having the feeling that there was something to be discovered in this place. Once again I got out of the car. I walked down the little slope and looked around. The air was very still. From the north, the direction of the invisible river, a raven flew in and perched at the top of a cottonwood.

"Hello, Raven," I said.

I leaned against one of the trees. The grooved bark pressed at my back. On heavy wings the raven departed for another tree. Silence spread. I sighed. Something had already started to shift in me. I felt myself settling into this overused, abandoned place, slipping into that attentive state in which it is possible to get intimate with our surroundings simply by allowing them to absorb us without judgment or expectation.

The raven flew back and landed in the tree I was leaning on.

And I thought: All right, I have given this place a chance. I answered the call. Now I can leave without any nagging regret that I might have passed up some opportunity. I



pushed away from the tree and headed toward the car. And hadn't gone a dozen steps before the raven flapped out of the tree in apparent pursuit. It headed toward the road, then boomeranged back to pass over my head. I pivoted, following its path with my eyes.

Now the bird returned, and this time instead of flying past me, it began to circle over my head. It was so close that I could see its feet, how the toes were tucked under the shiny black belly.

It seemed nothing less than an invitation, so of course I said yes. Lifting my arms out to my sides, I, too, began to circle.

There is no other way to say this: we spun together, this raven and I. We danced. We moved in synchronous orbit. The center pole we pivoted hung somewhere in the sky between us, keeping us both in a rhythmic motion that neither of us seemed to control. Time elapsed. Only place existed, and motion, the motion of two beings who had found a partner with whom to spin in the spinning cosmos. How long it lasted I do not know. At some point I was starting to feel dizzy. I said, "Thank you, Raven, for calling me here."

At that the raven flew off. I knew immediately that my human attention to my physical condition had precipitated the break. I regretted not having been able to twirl longer. But I had spun with a raven, and that was enough. For several minutes I stood still as the experience radiated from

me like hot sun off stone. Then I turned and walked back to the car, and I was about to open the door when the bird returned yet again. I caught my breath, ready for another dance. But it simply arced a wide parabola and this time flew away.

I don't know if that particular raven called me to that place. Or maybe there was some spirit of place that summoned both bird and human to a meeting there. There had been a call, a gravitational pull emanating from that forlorn and desolate land, and I had had the good sense to respond. I will never know the answer to the mystery. I don't need to know. There was a call and there was a raven who decided to spin with a woman, and the woman said Yes, and the mystery lives on.



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