

Spark #1.13 -Waiting for the Gift of Sound and Vision

- Henry Warwick

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A few weeks ago, my three-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, and I went to the supermarket to procure family foodstuffs. It was a typical late autumn afternoon in San Francisco- the weather was a bit cool, but not chilly, and everyone was dressed in their Halloween best, in deference to San Francisco's national holiday. The sun was bright, but not strong, and the earthy odor of pumpkin hung lightly in the air. Several ratty pigeons and starlings were manoeuvring about, wheeling and jumping over some bit of bread in the middle of the parking lot.

Earlier that morning, by vague chance, I had heard the old Paul McCartney tune "It's Just Another Day" while standing on queue at the Bagel Shop, waiting to place my traditional Saturday morning order of a pumpernickel bagel toasted with onions and whitefish, with two poppyseed muffins and a large coffee to go. And I thought- "Yep- it's just another day..."

Every common day, every blast of time lost to the vagaries of inattention, lack of sleep, minor illness or hangover, every last drop of life spent making plans or spun out in idle fantasy, it's every precious moment of consciousness being washed away in the steady drizzle of time. And I found myself there, in the bagel shop, wearily hauling myself through another diluted day of local festival and fun, listening to Paul McCartney on a scratchy FM radio suspended behind the bagel counter from a nail and some frayed picture hanging wire.

I sampled some of the whitefish on bagel chips that had been set out for free to the public, and grumbled my order in my classic New York/New Jersey brogue (Yeah- I'd, uh, like, uh, I'd like a pumpanickl bagel wit whitefishin onions. Anna coupla poppyseed muffins, and dis cawfee I'm pouring 'ere. Thanks!) to the geriatric clerk behind the counter. The clerk, her wrinkled careworn face also a product of that Eastern Region of pollution and architecture, greed and fraternity, inextinguishable hope bound at the wrists and ankles to unbridled despair, said "Yeah, sure thing chief- dat'll be, uh, oh, lessee here- eight dollaz an twenny nine cents."

I paid the man and wandered out into the sunshine thinking/singing "It's just another day - dup dup dum dum dum..." and drove home in my bandaged but ever ready Toyota. I delivered the breakfast, and after the morning ritual of getting Elizabeth dressed I took her to the store to buy some food with me. We listened to Stereolab in the car, which lifted her spirits- she likes to dance to Stereolab, especially the song "Ping Pong" where they say "Don't worry - be happy, thing'll get better naturally". I didn't then and still don't have the heart to tell her that the song is dripping in irony and is actually quite tragic.

I figure she'll figure that out herself in due time. And besides, she's been on this endless loop kick of "Cuisine" by Severed Heads and "Frosty the Snow Man" for a few weeks, so I figure I can handle her crying of "Daddeeeee! Play Teweolab! I wanna hear Teweolab! I wanna hear da Ping Pong song!"

It's a decent break from Tom Ellard's loop of "Kangaroo Skippy Roo". As much as I like it, this three year old likes it MORE and CONTINUOUSLY and that piece can be rather unnerving on endless loop....

Oh, the joys of fatherhood.

So we pull into the Supermarket parking lot just as Ping Pong finishes, and we make our way across the lot, hand in hand, when we see the birds. I'm talking to her about something, I don't remember what-when she says "Daddy!!!! SSSHHHHHH!!!! You'll scare the birdies! You hafta be quiet or they all fled away!"

Right. Like I can possibly scare these grizzled old veterans of the urban landscape, the pigeon and starling. Somehow, We Don't Think So. But, to appease little miss naturalist we walk gingerly around the warring birds, in their life and death struggle for a pasty white bit of Wonderbread. It's just another day, don't worry be happy, stepping into shoes, it's only their lives and the lives of their next of kin that they are losing, dipping in the pocket of her raincoat, dum dum dum dee da dumdee dadee yaddi yaddi dum dum dum da uh uh...

It was a common scene, one of great profundity as all common life is. It's really always there if we keep our eyes and ears open. It is there all the time. Often, I have to actively work at keeping it out — it drives me batty sometimes. But just having a cup of coffee, a bagel, and a walk with a three year old to the Safeway down the road, the epic struggles of life and survival, consideration and compassion, truth and duty can all be played out in front of me. It's everything we ignore and cut out that is the content of life, and it is consistent throughout — from the economics of whitefish to the battles over bread- we're all in it together.

So we should be careful and not scare the birdies, and listen with our eyes and watch the sounds around us for clues to the sublime levels of universal order and its poignant and sometimes tragic beauty that surround us every moment of our lives. We don't have to wait for the gift of sound and vision. We ARE the gift of sound and vision. It is our luxury of time and our burden of history, and our one small private victory against the forces of hopeless darkness and ever changing shadows. For, as Black Elk said, it is in these shadows that people get lost.