

The View From Heifer Hill—November 2008

Crazy Like Ed

Of the many rainy April nights I have spent on salamander crossing brigades, two emerge from my memory most vividly. On the first of these nights, we patrolled in front of a farmhouse where hundreds of amphibians cross the road to reach a small pond. The farmhouse had new tenants, and naturally they came out to find out what the people with flashlights were doing wandering back and forth in the rain. Another “crossing guard” had explained our activity by the time I reached them. One of the new residents, a saffron-robed Tibetan monk, beamed and nodded, and exclaimed in broken English how happy he was to see us caring for the lives of other creatures. He also managed to convey that, in spite of his appreciation, he was squeamish about touching amphibians himself. At least I think that is what he was trying to say. I’ll never be sure because his interpreter was already down the road laughing at the discovery of a spotted salamander.

Though I seldom have a chance to pause and chat on crossing nights, I learned that the interpreter, a tall man with holey gloves, had just returned to Vermont from Massachusetts, and that his name was Ed. The rest of the evening had an air of lightness, for Ed sang and laughed and the monk smiled and nodded from his driveway.

The next night I arrived before dark to count frog eggs in the pond near the farmhouse—the destination of the road-crossing amphibians. Ed came out and joined me, eagerly asking questions about amphibian biology. He came out again when darkness fell and embellished the salamander crossing with laughter, songs from musicals, sacred chants, and cheerful conversation with the salamanders and frogs he carried across the road. You might assume from this description that Ed was even fruitier than the rest of us, but I knew I was in the presence of a person with an unusual capacity for joy and compassion, and if that is craziness the world would be a better place with more of it.

That was the last night of the amphibian migration for 2006, and the next year the farmhouse had different tenants. I write of this springtime memory in the autumn of 2008 because Ed Softky was killed a few weeks ago when he was hit by a car on High Street. He had just delivered refreshments to a hospice training. I read a number of the tributes to Ed that appeared after his death. They confirmed my impression. He was exceptionally generous, kind, and happy.

As I remembered Ed, I wondered if such extraordinary people are born with an aptitude for joy or if it can be developed. Was Ed’s *joie de vivre* the result of his Buddhism? I decided to revisit some reading I’d done on the human brain. One relevant study appeared in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2004. The study compared the brains of a group of Buddhists who had meditated for at least twenty years with those of a control group who had been trained in meditation techniques and had practiced for a week. The long-time meditators exhibited remarkably high levels of activity in parts of the brain associated with positive emotions. When the Buddhists meditated on compassion, these same brain areas were stimulated, suggesting that compassion brings pleasure.

The two of you who read this column every month might be wondering what this has to do with beavers. Here is the oblique connection. Since I began my almost daily treks to Popple’s Pond, these visits have become central to my life. Once there the rest of the world falls away and my mind is quiet with watching. I have sometimes arrived at the pond carrying the stresses of a busy life and find myself restored by immersion in lives proceeding at a natural pace. Already I find my spirits strengthened by this informal meditation on nature. I see now that my pond visits present an opportunity to develop my mind. Maybe after another twenty years of beaver watching I will be crazy like Ed. I’m sure the world would be better for it.

As for the beavers, I doubt they've spent much time meditating lately. Because of a trip to Maine, I managed only four visits to Popple's Pond between late September and mid-October. Mother and baby beaver were present each time I visited, and I sometimes saw another adult, but I grew worried when I saw no evidence that they were preparing for winter. When my work schedule finally permitted, I checked all of the places upstream and downstream where I had seen them over the past year. I found no food caches nor fortified lodges. Two days ago I decided to check an old beaver meadow farther upstream. My ears discovered what they'd done before my eyes did, for the stream that once meandered silently now had the voice of a cascade. When I rounded the corner, I saw it tumbling over a brand new dam some

eighty feet long. A lodge had been constructed on the shore of the new pond and a cache of branches was submerged near its entrance, their winter food store. I hiked around the pond filled with admiration for the beavers' accomplishments, and feeling a proper fool for not discovering it earlier. I paused in a clearing across from the new lodge and saw a beaver torpedoing beneath the water toward me. After a moment of scrutiny, Willow hauled herself ashore and came up to see what I'd brought for supper.

I'm looking forward to a month of beaver watching at Surprise Pond before the ice locks the beavers in for the winter. I'll have to dress warmly and get there early, but there won't be any mosquitoes! Oh joy!

