

A Lesson to be Writ Large?

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With
Held Lightly
by Andrew Campbell

This is a true short story. Elements of it are more earthy than I might like to write about, but they cannot be disguised and still have a story. I happen to think it's a story worth sharing. Despite its earthy origins—if not because of them—it seems worth sharing because of its lesson. In sharing my story, lesson, and reflections on it, I hope this leads others to imagine what sorts of personal and social significance might be gleaned from such a lesson. I wonder if it might be a lesson we wish would be writ large.

On many nights, I keep my bedroom windows open. One morning last autumn, I awoke well before dawn, unusual for me. An odd smell in the room was the culprit that woke me. Once I was awake enough to do so, I realized the smell was in the outside air breezing through the window nearest my bed. It was an alien odor I had never smelled before. Noting that, I closed the windows and fell back asleep. When the alarm clock woke me later, I was surprised that the odor was still in the room. As I moved through the house doing my usual morning things, I was more surprised to find that it permeated the house. I closed every window to shut it out, thus simultaneously trapping it in the house. There was no escaping the awful thing!

When it was time to walk up to the barn to feed the animals, I noticed the smell was stronger in certain areas than others, and fainter near the barn. When I walked down the long driveway hill to get the morning newspaper, across the bridge that spans the creek down there, the odor was much fainter than up the hill where the house sits. So, I toured around the house, determining that the odor was strongest on the south side where there are several hilly acres of woods. It was so strong there that I became nauseous and wanted only to escape the inescapable!

I began to form a hypothesis about the odor's origin. My memory traveled back a handful of years, to a time when a decomposed human body was discovered in the creek, downstream from my place. It was found near a public bridge that spanned the creek not too far from here. I remembered a neighbor telling me at the time that for several weeks, when he drove over that bridge, he knew the odor he smelled "just wasn't right." At least in the 20/20 hindsight he had when telling me about it, he said he was sure it must have been a human body decomposing. He had smelled plenty of dead animals, and this was not that. Perhaps he had military service in earlier decades that taught him such smells. He wished he had called the police to tell them about it, long before someone else eventually did.

Coming back to the autumn 2007 odor that plagued me, my hypothesis—conviction, really—was this: there was a decaying human corpse somewhere on the south side of my property, and



relatively near the house. Once I reached that conclusion, all I wanted to do was pick up the phone and call the police to get them over here to search, find, and remove the corpse. I wanted that nauseous odor exorcised from my morning air!

I delayed that gratification. It was still quite early, and my son was still asleep. The hubbub of a search party tramping around outside would be a rude way to wake up. I would wait to call the police until Paul was up and I could tell him what was going on.

A couple of hours later, that time came. When I told him about all this, the first thing he did was open his south-facing bedroom window and sniff the air. It smelled like great, fresh autumn morning air to him. I was shocked! Maybe the breeze had shifted and was temporarily blowing the odor away from the house. We headed outside so he could smell the same awful thing I smelled. While I was doing everything in my power to not retch at the horribleness of breathing it in, Paul was consistently shaking his head and saying, “No, I don’t smell anything. Are you sure this is where you smelled it? Are you sure you smell something?” Why couldn’t *he* smell it? What kind of turnabout was this, anyway? The whole experience began to feel incredibly surreal.

My sons are notorious in this family for humoring me. Paul performed marvelously. Despite his conviction that it was ridiculous to think there was a rotting corpse nearby, he asked what places I thought it might be hidden, and offered to do a search. But first he had to head to campus for classes. He couldn’t start the search till afternoon. He extracted my promise to not call the police until he got back and could do the search himself, first. He was determined to spare me (and probably himself) having the police search party decide I was a crazy old lady and have a good laugh at my expense. Not to mention that all of that would be at taxpayers’ expense!

Sauntering into the house after class that afternoon, Paul announced with a big grin that he was ready to go find a dead body, and headed outside. A bit later, he came back with the report that there was nothing anywhere and still no odor. We looked at each other. He was grinning from ear to ear. I wasn’t. Surely with a very furrowed brow, I was in a state of severe cognitive dissonance! I had to admit, upon a moment’s reflection, that the smell had faded sometime around noon, and now it was mid-afternoon. If there were a dead body outside, it certainly would not stop stinking as the sun got higher and warmer.

“Okay,” I admitted, “there must not be a dead body. There must be something wrong with my nose.” We broke into hilarious laughter at the ludicrous drama I had created. Laughing while shaking my head, I was still mystified. Good grief! How did I concoct something like this?

Just as earlier that morning I had had to come up with some story that would make sense of the horrible smell, by now in mid-afternoon, I had to come up with a new story to explain why the dead body story didn’t work. Damn, what a crazy way to spend a day! I could not let this dissonance go unresolved.

The next story I came up with made sense, literally. It was about my sense of smell. I remembered I had had a first-time-ever allergy attack two or three weeks before this. It started right after doing some autumn grass mowing. For two days, I had all the allergy symptoms I had always heard about and never suffered. Then it turned into a sinus infection that seemed to last

and last. Somehow, I figured, by that morning, the status of the sinus infection must have changed, and a different chemistry was playing out. It must have interacted with the air from a perhaps overnight development of a certain musty-moldiness in the woods, and resulted in a yet more different chemistry in my sinuses. Voila! Combined with my recall of local history, I constructed the explanation of a dead body outside!

What message—or messages—might be writ large from this little story? The commonplace saying that “perception is reality” is not only figurative, but literal. My nasal system activity proved it. I treasure that proof for its concreteness. I have decades’ worth of experience of living out of different worldviews, and am intimate with the use of multiple stories to interpret the world, events, others, and myself through those different lenses. These are more abstract experiences. But here, my distorted sense of smell taught me *afresh* (oh, how I wish that air had smelled fresh!) how really real, concrete, and seemingly indisputable our perceptions of reality—and therefore our perspectives on reality—can seem to be.

Someone who told me about a trip on acid reported the same sort of insight: on acid, the manifest world of sky and land and trees and buildings did crazy things that defied all laws of physics and thermodynamics. After the trip, the “normal world” of every day became merely another perception, held lightly, without attachment, no longer assumed to be “reality” but rather, mere likely-transitory perception.

What would our personal, interpersonal, and larger-scaled social and political dynamics be like if we all realized that what we perceive in self, others, and the world was not necessarily so? What kind of transformations might result?

My hopeful hypothesis is that many would discover how essential it is to become earnest inquirers into our own and others’ experiences: question-posers, answer-seekers, and assumption-disrupters who assume little but discover much by asking questions, by probing our experience, by doubting both our senses and our sense-making, by questioning the stories we tell ourselves about how we, others, and the world work. Dare we imagine that?

What further kinds of transformations might result from that sort of transformation? Ahhh... I can think of multitudes of behaviors and assumptions that would find replacements, in such forms as co-constructed, multi-faceted versions of many diverse persons describing “how it is, what it is, from my perspective.” Dare we imagine that?

And what kinds of transformations might result from *those* sorts of transformation? Ahhhhhh...! We would learn how to tango¹ with our multi-faceted selves and our multi-faceted fellow beings in our families, organizations, communities, regions, nations, and natural world. We would learn new dance steps and dances to tell ourselves new stories about how we work our world and hand us mirrors to see how our stories tell us. Dare we imagine that?

¹ For more about these dynamics, see Ross, S. N. (2005). Toward an integral process theory of human dynamics: Dancing the universal tango. *Integral Review* 1, 64-84. <http://integral-review.org>

And what kinds of transformations might result from *those* amazing transformations? A-ho! We would name how we must work ourselves in our world differently and actually do so. Dare we imagine that?

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Held Lightly, watercolours, acrylics and oils *suspended* over stretched canvas,
Andrew Campbell April 2008