

9. On Gentleness

Anne Dufourmantelle has written that crucial moments of our lives, particularly at the beginning and end, are marked by gentleness: the capacity to attend closely to another. The particular kind of attentiveness that gentleness demands is the terrain of exposure, an exposure given permission, made believable by touch.

Evoking gentleness carries real hazards. Being *gentle* can suggest a cloying anti-conflictual softness, a genteel gentility, a performatively tender underbelly, a bourgeois lack of grit. We want to suggest something else here: that gentleness is an unworking, a commitment and substantive care for the other.

Gentleness can move beyond appeasement to a site of agency, resistance and reflection as a mode of living, as a means to traverse anxieties, to not look away, and a vigilance to watch, patiently or not, and demarcate the contours of antagonism. Gentleness displayed at an unexpected, unanticipated moment has the power to overwrite, recode and produce new grammars of exchange. The good life corresponds to the possibility of being together, in a politics that has a horizon beyond the human and a capacity to attend to an entwined exposure. It is not a retreat or an escape or simply a place of symbolic resistance. In and of itself, it has the power to reorder our relations with one another and the more-than-human. To act gently is a form of power that is a real force of resistance.

Gentleness is often presented as the opposite of brutality and vulgarity, as the sweetness of living, a place to recover time. If we wanted to imagine a borderless world, something beyond the dreams of a state or a nation or an ethnicity, the agility to think around traditional demar-

cation lines allows a way into that possibility. In the material life of the everyday, in the very risk of living, in the porosity of touching, we can sense the possibility of a new kind of relation and politics through exposure to one another and the more-than-human.

Our relationships with animals, especially pets, are often marked by a startling gentleness. Companion animals instigate all kinds of behaviours, from creepy baby-talk to absurd authoritarianisms and violence, but maybe more than anything, human-animal interspecies relationships are marked by touching. If we are even half-sure an animal won't attack or bite, our instincts impel us to reach out, to invite the bird to eat out of our hands, to stroke the neighbour's cat, to invite the roadside bear to sniff the car window, to blow in a horse's nose, to touch the horn of a passing cow.

Our instincts with animals are often stupid and dangerous and regrettable but speak to a shamelessness that the desire to touch evokes. We know that whale-watching and zoos and aquariums are brutal, demeaning exercises, imprisoning or harassing animals for our own amusement, but they also give permission to delight. The argument that the suffering of specific animals in captivity is justified by the generalised empathy seeing them evokes for the rest of the more-than-human world is an awful apologism, a trade we should never agree to, but there is truth there.

Being in proximity to animals we would never encounter otherwise dislodges our own gentleness, partially because of their size and shape and capacities, but also because we have no permission to touch. With pets we are afforded a passport to tactility, to physical points of corporeal exchange where there is simultaneous recognition of strange incommensurabilities and of permeable borders.

The feeling of a cat licking your arm, a dog resting its head on your lap, or a bird sitting on your shoulder instigates a kind of timelessness, a suspension of belief, and a relief that temporary passage has been granted. The flesh on fleshness of touching an animal is also always a risk. There is always an unsettledness, an unsurety that the animal won't bite or claw or scare you for unclear reasons, even animals you have touched a thousand times before. Touching an animal requires an

attentiveness, a presence, an alertness, a demand to be right there, right now, otherwise you might get bit or stomped or clawed. It is a presence that recognizes an animal's particular subjectivity, its own-ness to itself.

This attentiveness is redolent of the quiet dance before you go in for a hug with a stranger, that moment when you try to figure out if the person you are meeting wants a kiss on the cheek or on both cheeks, a high five, a fist bump, a handshake, hand on your heart, or just a smile. Touching, or not, with a stranger or across species, in that moment of attentiveness is something of gentleness.

Tactility, in touching another body, maybe especially animal bodies, does a welcome trick in undermining contemporary fetishizations of ontological alterities. In having to be present, to be alert to unexpected reactions in suspended fleshly borderlessness, requires that we shed most of our generalized beliefs about how 'dogs' act, or what 'birds' like, or how 'cows' want to be touched.

Broad indexing of animal behaviour might be an initial point of departure, but every animal is its own, with its own opinions, preferences, and styles, just like the rest of us. Every bird – whether it is a crow on the porch, a cockatoo in a cage, or a starling in a murmuration- is full of its ownness. Touching, or not, asks for both a timely and a timeless attentiveness, a gentleness in learning how any one bird, or person, would be willing to touch or be touched, if at all.

Most of the urban Global North has hygienically cleansed its relationships with animals as much as with other humans. Our citified animal interactions are reduced to pet-companions, occasional incursions of raccoons or rats or birds, and steady maintenance and distance from most anything else. In much of the rural, working-class North and even more so across the Global South, human-animal interspecies relationships are more fulsome and co-habitational, learning from one another's presence – cows on the street, wet markets, strays everywhere, coyotes in the backyard, unwelcome insects getting into the house, macaques stealing food, sheep free-ranging.

Many of those encounters are tangential and everyday obstacles, but many of them are working relationships, labouring with and beside animals in what Radhika Govindrajan calls 'animal intimacies,' relation-

ships that straddle “incommensurable differences” and “ineffable affinity.”¹ They can be sweet and mutually beneficial, and also infused with power, control, confinement, and violence. Govindrajan writes of cows weaponized by Hindutva, women sexualizing bears, pigs who are sort of domesticated, monkeys as agents of enclosure – all kinds of dissonances and resonances, subtle and symbolic accommodations, constant negotiations that she calls interspecies relatedness – living and dying with animals around.

Animals are always leaking through our best plans: mice and ants and insects sneaking into the house past every defense, goats and sheep and cattle escaping through broken fences, cat and dogs running off, elephants stomping through villages and fields, raccoons destroying lawns, birds shitting all over your car. Learning to live with animals requires forms of exposure and gentleness sometimes over duration, sometimes very momentary.

The gentleness we are after here is an attentiveness, to animals as species but as individuals as well. Not a sycophantic willingness to appease them no matter what, nor a reflexive containment, extermination or driving off. Interspecies relations ask for a curious attention that can operate at multiple scales, individually and collectively.

Conventional renditions of gentleness tend to revolve around the withholding of possible violence or force, refusing domination or the shepherding of strength. The gentleness implied when holding a small animal is that if you are not careful, you could damage this sweet thing. If you are not attentive to how you hold a newborn you could hurt their neck. If you are visiting with someone going through a tough time you need to be careful with your words as they might be feeling particularly tender. This is a kind of gentleness that presumes weakness of the other, a gentleness willing to be exposed in its strength.

A more politically generative interspecies gentleness is an attentiveness that does not need to reduce the other, does not need to extract anything. As Oxana Timofeeva puts it, it is to think the sovereign beyond the

1 Radhika Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

human. The pleasure of touching fur or trunk or horn or claw or wing is delightful, but also unsteading in its strange, tactile confirmation of the unbelievable things animals can do and are, things that humans are incapable of:

By accepting our animality, I do not mean going back to nature, being natural, listening to one's nature – nothing of this kind. It is not about yoga, biological products, sexual freedoms, sports, and other more or less commercialized practices of self-care performed by temporary bourgeois individuals. By accepting the animal that I am, I mean a movement toward self-alteration or dis-identifying that implies separating from the position of power. [...]. The attempt to go beyond individuality, to use my humanness merely as a point of departure or a bearer of the other, is not safe, as it breaks my autonomy, but this might be the way to the sovereign being beyond the human. The animal is already here, typing these letters, but to set it free requires a lot of theoretical and practical work that cannot be done in solitude: for this, a collective of various creatures is needed. How to create this collective and how to be a part of it – this is the question for the future interspecies politics.²

We submit that gentleness can be precisely this practical point of departure: an attentiveness and presence that hazards exposure. We know what this feels like, literally. It is a presence that might be called consent, a noticing that does not imply domination, nor weakness. It is a mode that the pandemic required of us constantly, noticing each other's comfort levels, masks on or off, inside or out, distanced or not. The proliferation of the virus, the porousness of where one's body begins and the other ends, and the matrices of entanglement, control, symptoms, shame, and the bodily chains of transmission that inextricably bind one to the other come to the surface where gentleness emerges as a site of daily political agency.

² M. Buna, 'Why Still Look at Animals: A Conversation with Oxana Timofeeva', LA Review of Books, October 27th, 2018.

The same kinds of corporeal attentiveness are always in motion in playfulness. Playing is definitionally useless, it is extra, surplus behaviour. Playful fun is not required for survival, it overflows everyday drudgery, it has no material purpose, it is extravagant in its waste of time and energy. But to play well requires a very specific kind of attentiveness.

If you are playing pickup basketball you need to fit in to the intensity, skill level, fitness and style of everyone else in the game – if you do not or cannot notice, the game is compromised. In the midst of play-fighting, between animals and/or humans, participants have to modulate themselves even more closely. If someone plays too hard, and bites or wrestles or hits too aggressively, then the game is no longer fun, it's too much like actual fighting and someone likely gets hurt. If your play-fighting is lack-luster, the game is no fun either, there's no energy, no thrill. If it does not approximate the adrenaline of fighting, the game is boring.³

It is always complicated to discern this goldilocks zone: what is just enough and not too much. It requires a close attentiveness to whoever you are play-fighting with, making sure they are not hurt, they are enjoying the experience, that they are not angry or frustrated. The right zone of play is never fixed, it is always moving, the borders are constantly being reset, and playfighters, whether wolf cubs or teenagers, have to be constantly alert to how their opponent is doing and feeling. It is a skill that most parents start teaching their offspring almost immediately. A mother dog moves from play to admonishment seamlessly if one of her offspring bites too hard: gently and powerfully grabbing her pup's neck with her jaw.

This gentleness is a critical feature of all sports, and especially combat and physical sports, where bodily damage is always at risk. The gentleness required to play these sports surprises people who are unfamiliar with boxing or jiu jitsu or football, games that are based around hitting or manipulating each other's bodies powerfully. To play these sports

³ Brian Massumi in *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*, Duke University Press, 2014 does a brilliant job thinking about animal play, we've just riffed on it here.

is always to be at real, very prescient risk and you can only enter knowing that your opponents have agreed to very specific conditions that will limit the amount of damage you incur. The zones of agreement are malleable and obscured, especially when players are tired or emotional, but are always central to the game's validity. When they are violated, deliberately or accidentally, it is an occasion of real concern. The gentleness that combatants or opponents feel for one another is visible after the game is over – players hugging, fighters tenderly confirming each other's welfare, players making sure they have not crossed too far over the lines.

Attentiveness is similarly required for verbal playfulness: teasing, poking, talking shit, sharing inside jokes, or ribbing each other. Friendly exposure suggests a willingness to have your own pomposities punctured, to have your dignity laughed at, to have our embarrassing stories surfaced. Our friends know what they can tease us about and when it's too much. Playfulness lets us drop our guards and relax, allows for an openness, but only if does not go too far. The lines are always shifting, some days we are happy to be teased other times are not up for it at all. Our friends are attuned to our modes, and we trust that they will care for us and not do actual damage, nor exploit our exposure.

Playfulness is a critical political mode: a gentle testing of the waters, setting and resetting limits, pushing and withdrawing. It is a creative act of borderlessness – with animals, between other animals, between humans. There is a mobilising role for playfulnesses we hazard and in determining the inside and outside. Gentleness isn't necessarily a natural or resting state of the world, but even when friends spar or play, there is a duty of attentiveness with one another. There is no friendship without a possible wound. The potential suffering, sacrifice and labour involved in friendship requires maintenance and malleability.

To imagine a being-with the more-than-human is to move gently into the open and reconsider what the preservation of human and more-than-human life entails. Exposure, playfulness, vulnerability, forgiveness, gentleness as a mode-of-life, in a political sense, suggests an ecological validity to move beyond the straitjacket of a closed, anthropocentric orientation.

