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T-REX

From *With Animals in Mind*

My grandson Raymond became obsessed with Tyrannosaurus Rex at about age five. The younger of two brothers, Ray lives with an emotional intensity that can send him reeling with no apparent explanation and running outdoors for the safety of solitude where he will wander the pine woods behind his yard for an hour, stewing in his feelings until he has them ordered and is ready again to join the social world. It's folly to try to cajole him out of his intensities. They are part of his weather. He knows this and will one day perhaps become an artist who can describe these storms to others in a way that will make them legible both to himself and to others who are less articulate and who find themselves getting lost in emotional turbulence.

The powerlessness of those moments when he can do nothing but split from family and his own social self must be frightening in a child who, by definition, needs the nurture of family. I suspect this volatility had something to do with his extreme affection at a certain age for T-Rex. One could see a look of mischievous competence creep over his face as he began to lumber about the room, two fingers of each hand raised like claws. Heavy-footed, predatory, incapable of language beyond a guttural, reptilian hiss, he would stalk along the edges of an adult conversation, and everyone present would know he was testing his small power against the great and confusing powers of the adult world. It appeared he found that small power quite sufficient to keep him in the room. He was not only a good imitator, but became, as he continued to practice his shamanism, an expert on T-Rex paleontology. When I once tried to play T-Rex back at him, raising

three fingers in each hand into claws, he found it necessary to break out of role and coach me, his patience with my ignorance barely contained. “No, Grandma, tee-tee has only two fingers. Three toes and two fingers.” I had spoiled the game by being a lousy scientist. This was, in fact, not a game, but a trying on of animal power by a creature as yet uncertain of his own.

Ray is now a seasoned nine-year old, and so I called on the telephone to tell him I was writing about how important animals are to people. I asked him if he remembered how much he’d loved T-Rex when he was younger and if he remembered why. “Yeah,” he said coyly, “because he’s the biggest and strongest and fiercest of the dinosaurs.” I felt a moment of remorse that he found fierceness a desirable quality, until I recalled a list he’d once made for school when asked what were his earliest memories: (1) I would start crying every time my mom left the house; (2) I started to walk and talk; (3) I lost my first tooth and started riding a bike; (4) I went to second grade; (5) the terrorist attack.

I remember my own dinosaur infatuation, growing up in the post-World War II glow and denial of a heroic nation that was building its arsenal of doomsday machines while my family rode its emotional roller coaster up happy-faced hills and down rage-roaring precipices, a madness that sent me out into the woods for solace. My dinosaur was the diplodocus – bigger and more slender than the brontosaurus in my Golden Book natural history encyclopedia – muscular, graceful, a giant that could hold a beachhead just by standing its ground, its head above the trees. My partner Malcolm, who grew up lonesome in Oklahoma because his mother was too depressed to get out of bed in the morning and who came home from school at lunchtime to make himself a bacon

sandwich and see if she was still alive, claims the stegosaurus for his dinosaur. Why? I asked. “It was very well protected.”

We each have our personal dinosaur, it would appear, a monstrous version of ourselves, primitive, gargantuan, a being that completes us in our vulnerable, early years. What happens to that childhood capacity to protect and instruct ourselves through imaginative identification with animals? We continue the process, if we’re lucky, though it does become unseemly for an adult to stalk the edges of the dining room with a galumphing gait and forefingers raised. We name athletic teams the *Wildcats*, the *Bulldogs*, the *Cardinals*, though I’m not convinced these names hold much ceremonial meaning for us. Who could believe that the *Cardinals* stand a chance against the *Wildcats*? And we still play at animal identities, calling a lover Vixen or Stud, horsing around or acting pigheaded. I’ll admit that recently I have been referring, in private, to a certain, obstreperous family member as T-Rex, thereby safely ritualizing the hostility that another’s nastiness might provoke in me. Dinosaurs are extinct, as we all know, so what could be a safer way to imagine ourselves as invulnerable or our antagonists as extinct forms of being when we need to be larger and more fearless than it’s possible for us to be?