

Hang Up Your Bird and Talk to Me

Hamilton College
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The title of my remarks today originates in a suggestion by Hamilton student Alex Jones, '10. I met a group of Hamilton students in Beijing attending ACC, Associated Colleges in China, a consortium we sponsor, run quite capably by Professor Hong Gang Jin in the East Asian Languages and Literature department. Alex, speaking entirely in Chinese, told me, through an interpreter, that from what he knew about me – mostly, I gathered, from my maritime literary pursuits last year – that I ought to go to the Temple of Sun and see the old folks walking and talking with their birds. I thought, we must be having translation problems. No, he said, he meant birds.

I was not in Beijing for the Olympics, although Olympian preparations were well underway during our visit. I traveled with Hamilton's chief financial officer, Karen Leach, to review and conduct business relating to our program in China. We found the Chinese to be extraordinarily welcoming, open, and receptive, eager to introduce us to aspects of their culture, eager to hear our impressions. And the skyline of Beijing was a series of cranes and scaffolding; verily, we might say, the world was under construction.

As I find in general that listening to Hamilton students is a good idea, we arranged a special trip to Ritan (or, Temple of Sun) Park. Sun Altar was built in 1530, during the Ming Dynasty. It was the place where the Ming and *Tsing*¹ emperors worshipped the god of the sun—the sun god and the emperors are gone now, but the site remains a place of intense human activity. It covers an area of over 50 acres, about half of which are covered by greenery, including 44 ancient trees.²

The park abuts the Beijing embassy district, and our journey took us first by stately flag-bearing mansions with young Chinese guards standing at attention at successive entrance gates. At the park we gained admission for a small fee and walked through the turnstile. We were immediately confronted by activity—old people, mostly, singing and dancing, doing calisthenics, practicing various feats of skill. I learned about the Chinese Yo-Yo from a 73-year old man, after he led a spontaneous session of 36-pats: hundreds of park attendees and passers-by

¹ Qing

² <http://en.beijing2008.cn/spectators/beijing/tourism/list/n214243735.shtml> (July 23, 2008)

(including our bird-hunting expedition) followed his direction by patting chest, belly, loins, buttocks, hams, knees (front and back), calves, and ankles 36 times each, while chanting the count, one through thirty-six, at the top of our lungs—down the body and back up again. Having passed this circle, we went on to find small groups engaged in various movement exercises, others practicing ancient arts, and individual kite-flyers (Chinese style, the American spool replaced by a handle-and-wheel device). And finally the outside fitness center (rowing, lifting, crunching)—making the park a veritable convocation of all that the sun represents: life, longevity, good use, and the eternal return of fresh starts and new beginnings, of hope itself.

We did not see the birdwalkers and had to ask guidance. We were directed to a miniature forest, trees pruned to grow to six or seven feet, with low-hanging limbs reached handily by elderly Chinese men and women. The forest paths were lined with benches just wide enough for two. At first, all I saw were old men and women sitting on the benches. But Professor Jin pointed to the low-hanging branches, bench-eye level, on either side of the path. On these branches hung innumerable caged birds, singing. We listened to call and response, chorus and verse, as the birds engaged in a fierce and florid exchange. The birds, I think (although I would need to confirm this with English Professor Onno Oerlemans, as I verge on anthropomorphism) – well, the birds seemed happy, if happiness is where beautiful sounds of bird voices originate. One bird to my left had its head held high and its chest throbbing with life as it chirped in response (again, in my avian fantasy) to whatever it was that consumed those birds on that warm July morning in the Temple of Sun. And always within sight, an elderly man or woman, glancing now and then at one of the birds, and resuming conversation, one person on each end of the bench, one talking human being, the call and response, chorus and verse, engaged in fierce and florid exchange.

And then it occurred to me, an emblem of an open China, of the opening of the school year, of openness itself:

Friend or stranger, hang up your bird and talk to me.

Our guide explained, most of these men and women are widows. Solitary bird carriers. On their own for now. They keep birds for company, and bring their birds to the Temple of Sun for companionship. The caged birds engage with others of like-species predicament, as do the lone survivors of thirty, forty, and fifty years of marriage – themselves engaged by their memories, their identities inextricably conjoined to a ghost. And in time,

they remove the birds from their cages and walk them on leashes, for exercise. Committed to keeping the bird, and at the same time willing to hang it up, and explore new lives.

Before she died, Grace Paley wrote a poem, “One Day” which appeared in the *New Yorker*, posthumously, last year;³ the poem reappeared in my mind as I met the gaze of an old woman, seated on the bench facing a turn in the path, an open cage at her feet. She had looked up at this American stranger, briefly, and returned to her interlocutor, a man with a quiet face, speaking softly.

One Day [Grace Paley’s poem begins]

One day

one of us

will be lost

to the other

this has been

talked about but

lightly turning

away shyness this

business of con-

fronting the

preference for

survival

my mother said the

children are grown we

are both so sick let us

die together my father

³ Published in *The New Yorker*, accessed on line:

http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/poetry/2007/12/24/071224po_poem_paley2 (July 25, 2008)

replied no no you

will be well he lied

of course I

want you in the world

whether I'm in it or

not your spirit

I probably mean

there is always

something to say in

the end speaking

without breath one

of us will be lost

to the other

Maybe it was “there is always something to say” which arrested me that morning, or the inevitability of loss, or, as Ms. Paley so carefully has it, “this business of confronting the preference for survival.” Or, was it the cacophonous voices of the songbirds juxtaposed to the silent murmurings of the widowed bench sitters, a bird so tenderly cared for, placed out of touch but within sight, and the spouseless, and now birdless survivor, without breath, speaking.

I have a bird in a cage, I imagine you do too. Something we care about, something alive, something that maybe ought to be free but we've caged it and called it our own, so that now, without it, we feel incomplete. Something without which we'd feel unmoored. Lately, mine is richly plumed, robed and hooded. Sometimes you look at someone and you right away see—or think you see—their bird, because this bird I am talking about is loud, sings all the time, can't be missed for its preference for survival. Other times it's not so apparent, but say the word and TWEET, the bird starts to sing.

Today we convoke the academic community of Hamilton College, here, on this hill, and welcome in particular, the class of 2012. Admissions brings together as diverse a collection of backgrounds and interests as possible. Our curriculum gathers together thousands of years of thinking about the human condition, about human beings, and about the worlds they inhabit, imagine, and construct. Our faculty collects men and women possessing decades of study and research – we tend to use the term, *professor* more often than *teacher*, because these men and women *profess*: they have points of view, ideas, and convictions--their work is their life, their lives are consumed by their subject matter and expertise. Students, in the next four years, you'll encounter ideas, perspectives, and experiences unimagined, phenomena we expect will nurture your mind for a lifetime.

Each of you brings at least one caged bird, something you've nurtured for years, perhaps it is something given to you, or something acquired, something without which you'd feel a heavy sense of loss. Don't let me mislead you: there's nothing wrong with the possession--it's the will to relinquish that matters. You have got to be able to let go, if you are going to learn about anybody or anything outside yourself. *Hang up your bird, and talk to me*: no stranger souls on a bench, talking, exploring, surprising.

We hear a lot about colleges and diversity, and politically charged classrooms, and whether we have this view balanced with that view and whether the professor is professing when the teacher should be teaching and in every cage there is a bird singing about one or another point of view, blogging, posting, broadsiding, wiki-ing, texting --the explosion of communication technologies has made innumerable the outlets for human outrage. How is genuine learning possible in this environment? *Hang up your bird, and talk to me*.

Ours is an era of identity politics and calls for racial and ethnic and sexual and geographic and experiential diversity and variety, and as opposition strategies meet anti-authoritarian figures of authority we look into the eyes of the person on the bench next to us wondering what can we say and how can we say it and all we have at hand is the suggestion, *Hang up your bird, and talk to me*.

Back in the Temple of Sun, sitting on a bench, another old woman, alone. Her eyes were on her colorful caged bird, who sang notably clear and confident in its sense of song and beauty while she sat, her eyes looking blankly past without hearing, in some unrequited anticipation. We kept walking (we were tourists, after all) but that woman's face remains, -- an emblem of waiting. No doubt, given the fierce singularity of the bird she'd relinquished, she would not wait long.

Don't wait. Ask anyone old enough to remember: the next four years will pass quickly.

Denise Levertov, in a poem called "Waiting,"⁴ muses—

I am waiting.

On benches, at the corners

of earth's waitingrooms,

by trees whose sap rises, rises

to escape in gray leaves and lose

itself in the last air.

Waiting

for who comes at last,

late, lost, the forever

longed-for, walking

not my road but crossing

the corner where I wait.

Cross the corner – hang up your bird – don't wait – talk, engage, ask things you actually don't know. Upon matriculating at Hamilton College you have entered an intense universe of --- what shall I say? *privilege*, yes; *selectivity*, surely; scientific experimentation, athletic striving, a collection of some of the brightest, most interesting, ambitious, and curious young people alive at this moment, gathered on this Hill. With such privilege comes *obligation*: you are not an outsider here, you are, as a student (just as you are, as a faculty member or member of the staff) – *you are Hamilton College* – and as such, it, we, can only be as engaged and engaging as you make us. Ours is a world perpetually under construction, as each new class adds its scaffolding to our sightline. Don't wait. Hang up your bird often, let it sing on its own, and cross the corner where someone or something, like or not like you, anticipates.

⁴ From *Relearning the Alphabet* (NY: New Directions, 1970), p 47.