

An Epiphany

By Martin Boso

It was late spring, and the world had never looked so beautiful. Walking home from classes just north of campus, the sunlight filtering through the softly stirring maple leaves seemed impossibly green, an organic kaleidoscope the color of life, gently suspended above and around me.

Debbie had pushed me particularly hard that morning. She was a co-worker at the hospital – and also a gymnastics coach and fanatical weight lifter; a disciplined, motivated and inspirational workout partner. One room of her two-bedroom apartment was filled with the gleaming chrome frameworks and cables, the inclined black benches and floor mats of her home Universal gym. She knew every technique to mercilessly isolate any muscle and push it right to its limits -- perhaps even just a little beyond that. She had coached me into the best physical condition I had ever attained.

As usual, she had been chipper and chattering brightly about her latest crush by the time she was halfway through this morning's first cup of coffee. She was one of those rare women who is pretty the second she rolls out of bed in the morning, no makeup, mussed hair and all. During our warm-up exercises in the pinkish glow of the dawn through the living room window, she gossiped about the ward clerks we supervised together at the hospital.

The workouts were well worth a routine that got me out of bed at 5:00 AM. Today had been an upper body day; butterflies, military and bench, not as many abs today. Thank God. Those still hurt. However, she still insisted on finishing with an exquisite torture she had discovered – multiple sets of curls, starting maybe at 35 pounds or so. Curl 'til you absolutely can't lift it any more. Then your partner takes a turn and you rest. Take off 5 pounds, and then curl 'til your muscles fail again. Repeat until you can't even lift the bar with no weight on it. Push it to the limits.

By the time I had gotten to class at 8:00, hair still wet from the shower, I had just settled into that delicious, languid glow well-known to athletes and dancers. I felt like a well-tuned instrument, switched on and cranked up to full power. Your mind feels limitless, capable, *open*, when your body fills it with such a clear signal.

The Poetry class had been a good one today, Professor Citino was pleased with me. Everything I had written up to that point for his workshops was in traditional form – sonnets, villanelles, song lyrics and the like. Stuff that scanned and rhymed. He was of the modern school, and kept demanding that I free myself from those constraints. “Quit trying to sound like Poe!” he had written on one page, covered with marks showing how rigid the iambic pentameter had been. I happen to *like* iambic pentameter – it’s the singer in me, I guess. But I was there to learn something, after all. For this assignment, I had written in the free form that he was so insistent upon. Maybe they were pretty good. One girl in the class had cried during my reading.

In Philosophy we had begun exploring Ethical Relativism, and my mind was still spinning with analyses of the nature of right and wrong as I strolled under those sun-dappled maple trees.

“How was class?” shouted Lee from the kitchen as I walked in the front door. I’d been living with her for a couple years now. She was gorgeous, intelligent and compassionate. I had never loved anyone so much before.

“It was great,” I said, walking into the room and tousling her long, curly brown hair. “I think Dave really liked ‘Under the Bo Tree.’”

“Cool,” she said. “Hey, were you coming home for dinner? I think I might go over to Billy Joe’s after school tonight to study for that physiology exam. I just came home to feed Lucy.”

“I doubt if I’ll get the chance anyway,” I said, “The census in SI- and MI- are both really up. Plus it’s a full moon tonight, Labor and Delivery is going to be hopping. I’ll probably be lucky to make it down to the cafeteria.”

Both the Surgical and Medical Intensive Care Units at University Hospital had been unusually busy all spring. I would most likely be helping out on one of those units well into the evening, surrounded by loose piles of handwritten doctors’ orders and labeled tubes of blood, amidst the incessant clicking and susurrations of a dozen ventilators.

Working in a hospital changes a lot of your values. You come home every day knowing that what you do *matters*. People's lives are saved there. New babies come into the world. You're part of a team where every individual's performance can make a difference in the outcome. Almost any workplace conflict imaginable seems trivial after being the boss and having the responsibility of telling a hard-working, conscientious subordinate, "That patient *died* because of your mistake."

They say it takes a certain kind of person to work in such an environment, and I suppose it does. More like, it strengthens a certain aspect of your character. You know when you first get into it that you will see death, disease and injury, madness, tragedy, pain and grief. But all you need is the willingness to cope with it and keep your composure, make the right decisions and do whatever must be done. A healthy curiosity about medicine, anatomy and physiology helps.

If you stick around long enough, you *will* see plenty of blood, in fact just about any body fluid imaginable (and some you had *never* imagined). You will see people injured, maimed and burned. Deformities and decrepitude. Really awful *smells*. You'll hear people screaming or sobbing in pain, you'll see them naked, you'll see them tied down in restraints so they won't hurt themselves. You'll see their families with them, trying to handle the emotional trauma of the most difficult situations they have faced in their lives. Sometimes they won't be handling it so well, and it will be up to you to help them get through it as best they can. You'll get to know some of these patients and *really* like them, only to be asked one day to help lift their corpse onto a gurney.

And *yet*, a lot of these patients, *most* of them, get better. Once in a while you'll see a miracle. You'll see new human beings the first moment they come into this world. You'll see people return from the brink of death. Once I saw a guy come *back*. You will respect and admire your co-workers, and bond with them in a manner most people would find hard to comprehend. You will learn first hand what a complex, glorious, resilient and variable organism a human being really is. You will reach a point where you say, "I've seen everything..." and then, later, reach the point where you realize you were wrong, you can *never* say "I've seen everything" because there are always new surprises and exceptions in store. And you will see naked and exposed, every day, not just the human body but the human soul – at its best and at its worst.

But that aspect of my life was still a few hours away on this warm and already eventful day.

"I gotta get going," said Lee.

"OK," I said. "If I'm home by midnight, think you'll be up?"

"Mayyybe..." She grinned. "See ya then."

The sunshine outside was irresistible. I changed into some shorts, put on some music, probably Dire Straits or The Police, maybe Bob Marley, that's the kind of stuff I was listening to back then. I headed for the deck, set up the lounge chair and stretched out.

You've got to be honest, it's mostly vanity to spend time sun bathing. I tan easily, and I was already looking pretty good in those days. But people who think that's all there is to it are wrong. I've always responded to summer and sunshine on a certain physiological level too. I have more energy, need very little sleep, I'm happier and more creative when I'm getting plenty of sunshine.

Just lying there soaking it up, it's the very best form of meditation. You can let every thought completely drain from your mind, but you're not asleep, you're as wide awake as you can possibly be. It's like being a plant... you're simply and purely *alive*. Your worries and plans and internal dialogue all evaporate and there is nothing but physical sensation, an ecstatic immersion in that bright essential force, absorbing it, feeding on it.

I had just reached this transcendent place when there came a physical distraction, something tickling across the hairs of my chest. Dammit, a fly. I raised up my hand to slap it and squinted open my eyes to take aim. It was a honeybee.

From the moment I stayed my hand from killing her, I found her fascinating. A few inches from my eyes, she suddenly had features and was something more worthy of my attention than a trivial pest to be dispensed with. The striations of color on her abdomen, the fine fur on her thorax, the delicate veins in those crystalline wings, those black, black eyes and alert antennae... the intricate mechanisms of her legs, sacs of golden orange pollen like twin purses overflowing with loot at the hips of this little swaggering piratess...

She was exploring the hairs on my chest like an adventuress who has found some abandoned overgrown meadow in the midst of the jungle, wandering aimlessly without having a purpose, not needing one. And she kept turning around to face my eyes, and stopping. She was watching me watch her.

So I watched her, and then I noticed something. She was completely still, and had extended her proboscis down to the surface of my skin. She was drinking my sweat! I watched in complete enchantment as she probed so carefully and delicately – exactly like a kitten lapping at a bowl of milk. I could see the droplet diminish as it was taken into her body. And when she had had enough, she flew away.

She is going to go back to her hive, I thought, and she has my sweat, that by-product of this body, the chemical effluvia of my workout, those unique hormones and endorphins that I produce when writing poetry and studying philosophy and making love, that intimate essence of *me*, she has that -- and she's going to use it to make honey. What a tremendous thought! How utterly amazing!

She came back the next day. I hadn't expected that, and it surprised me just how thrilled I was to see her again. She meandered lazily across my shoulder and down my arm, took my perspiration like a sacrament, and I swear for a moment or two she just hung around to soak up some rays with me.

It was a revelation. She was such a tiny little thing, but so beautifully structured, and *alive*... what was drawing her to me? Was it purely a chemical phenomenon? Was I producing something, some exotic nutrient that she somehow felt she needed? That her hive, her *family* needed? If so, did I excrete this elixir because I was so happy, so healthy, so completely stimulated and productive and creative in my own life? What mysterious organic alchemy had created this unlikely relationship? Or could there be something beyond that? Some small spark of consciousness in her that found a particular quality, some certain rightness, some reward beyond biology, in this daily rendezvous?

And as spring melted into summer, that's what it became: a daily rendezvous. There was a dry spell, with seemingly limitless sunshine. Between my classes, my workout routine, my job and my relationship with Lee, there was always that little window period. About one o'clock every afternoon, even on the weekends, I reserved some time for *her*. Because I had realized something else.

When a honeybee finds a patch of fresh blossoms, a new source of nectar, what does she do? She goes back to the hive and tells the other worker bees about it, so they can all come and get some. They have that elaborate, inexplicable dance. You never have just one bee show up in a garden. But that wasn't the case here. I only saw this one individual, showing up alone every day, right on schedule. I knew her colors and striping, I knew every single miniscule hair on her. It was *her*, and I was her *secret*. She had something special here, something different, and she wasn't about to share it with those other bees. I was *hers*. It must sound crazy, but I am absolutely certain that this was true.

And I lived up to my end of it. I made sure I was there for her every single day, lying quietly, drifting into my reverie, the surface of my thoughts as still as the summer sky. She came to me every day, without exception. Then I would watch her explore my bicep or my belly, or I would pull my wrist directly before my eyes with her perched there, until all of her unique details seemed as huge and conspicuous as my own. Once I came up from my sun-trance when she arrived by landing on my cheek, and the familiar tickling brought nothing but smiling affection.

And then one day, she didn't come back. Nor was she there the next. I remembered that honeybees don't live very long, only for a few weeks at most. And I lay there and cried.

Here I was, a grown man, a prime specimen! happy and healthy and successful, with everything going for me, crying over a *bee*??!! I saw people, human beings, dying almost every day, and quietly offered their families some small professional comfort -- but there I was, bawling like a child, grieving for an insect.

How could such a thing happen? It took me quite a while to figure it out.

The obvious response would be, 'Martin, can't you see, it's all that poetry and philosophy which inspired you to project such importance upon that insignificant creature. The bee was just a deterministic bag of chemicals, it's you in your humanity that gave it significance.'

And not too politely, I would reply, "Bullshit."

In our arrogance, we humans believe consciousness and self awareness to be our exclusive domain. *Why?* Because we have invented such a clever conceit as words, to describe ourselves? Because we can build towering, intricate edifices of those words, and hold them in our minds at once, so captivated by the sparkling complexities of our individual fortresses that we fail to recognize them as prisons of our own construction?

But isn't all our yearning, passion and creativity a quest for *transcendence*? A desire to rip aside those veils, tear down the walls, shine out in the darkness? An imperative to seek out that unspoken and unspeakable essence of existence that we are all part of, and made of? To be certain that there is more of that essence somewhere beyond ourselves?

Maybe, for just an instant, the sunlight was bright enough to pierce my own inner veil, freeing me to perceive the tiniest fragment of that which surrounds all of us, always. My honeybee gave me the simple gift of her recognition, and thus taught me the most profound lesson: All living things are connected. The only absurdity in the Universe is our own failure or refusal to observe that.