

Excerpt from *Becoming Animal, An Earthly Cosmology*

By *David Abram*
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Editor's Note:

David Abram is an extraordinary, gifted storyteller and ecologist who was featured at our 2006 Mythic Journeys Conference. In his new book, *Becoming Animal*, he writes the following story which he told to a rapt audience at Mythic Journeys, and he has graciously given us permission to quote him here. Immerse yourself in this experience of David's near the coast of Alaska and you may find yourself seeing the earth and her creatures with new respect, awe, and gratitude.

This excerpt from Becoming Animal is from pages 159 to 169, from the chapter titled "The Speech of Things (Language I)."

The blades of my paddle slice the smooth skin of the water, first on one side and then on the other:

*klishhh...kloshhh...klooshhh...kloshhh...*The rhythm matches the quiet pace of my breathing as I rock gently from side to side, gliding over the gleaming expanse of sky; the luminous vault overhead mirrored perfectly in the glassy surface. Tall, snowcapped mountains rise from the perimeter of this broad sea, and also seem to descend into it. In front of me, to the west, are the peaks of the Alexander Archipelago, the long cluster of island off the southeast coast of Alaska; behind me are the glacier-hung peaks of the coast range. The liquid speech of the paddle sounds against the backdrop of a silence so vast it rings in my ears. The sky arcs over this world like the interior of a huge unstruck bell; the hanging sun is its tongue.

Between my kayak and those western slopes two smaller islands nestle close to one another. I am paddling towards them. I don't know the names of those islands, for I've not been in this region before. A breeze raises a pattern of ripples on the water's surface, then passes by: the mirror returns. *Klishhh...kloshhh...klishhh...*Sometimes another, more rapid rhythm becomes audible as a pair of ducks materializes out of the near distance, flapping just above the water's surface. The thudding of their wings against the shallow layer of air swells in volume and then fades as their shapes dissolve back into the distance on the other side of my kayak.

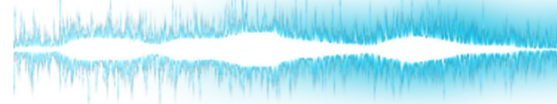


The islands draw closer with each flex of my arms, widening their span and soon filling my gaze with green, gentling my ears with the liquid lapping of water against rocks. I sense vaguely that I am being watched. So I scan the rocky shore and the dense wall of forest above the high-tide line on each island, but can see no one. Only when a flash of white snags the corner of my eye do I notice the eagle perched high on a dead trunk jutting out from the coast of the more northerly island. Its lustrous head is cocked slightly - a single eye following the glints on my paddle blades. And perhaps the gleam off my glasses, as well, for when I turn my face toward it the bird launches with a few flaps of its huge wings, banks, and soars off through the passage between the two islands. I adjust my direction and follow it, gliding beneath the needled woods on either side.

After a time I emerge from the channel; the echo of my paddle strokes off the double wall of trees widens out and dissipates, giving way to a muffled sound drifting up from the south, a faint but dissonant clamor that rises and falls in intensity. Curious, I swerve the kayak to the left and begin paddling down the west coast of the southernmost island. When I round a spit of land, the noise gets louder, a low-pitched, polyphonic rumble that I cannot place at all. It fades to silence as I stroke across a broad bay, and then rises to my ears as I glide around another peninsula, although more intermittent now, and as I listen to this dark music I realize that it's an entirely organic cacophony, a crowd of rambunctious grunting tones vying with one another. As I cross the next bay it fades again. Only when the kayak slips around the next point and I see the long, rocky spit on the far side of the following cove - its jagged terraces and angled rocks bedecked with a jumble of sleek, brown humps - do I recognize that I'm entering the neighborhood of a large sea lion colony.

Oddly, the brown bodies opposite are mostly quiet as I come into view; a few grunts reach my ears as they negotiate places on the rocks. I can't make out any pups, and so this cannot be one of the rookeries where sea lions gather to breed and give birth, but must be one of their communal haul-out sites. A very popular haul-out site. I count over eighty adult sea lions as I paddle slowly across the cove, and know there must be many others hidden from view. But it's their immense bulk that startles me as I gaze through my binoculars. These are northern, or Steller, sea lions, far larger than their southern cousins; later I learn that the bulls can weigh up to 2,500 pounds, and reach over eleven feet in length.

I see some of them staring in my direction as I paddle. When I'm halfway across the cove, one such bull on a slab of a rock near the water raises himself up on his flippers, dips his head a couple of times, and begins roaring in a deep, guttural voice that resounds in the hollow of the kayak and reverberates in the cave of my skull. Soon two other large bulls lying on a ledge above the first raise their torsos and begin hollering as well, and within a few minutes it seems every sea lion on that rocky outcrop is sounding its barbaric yawp over the waves. The raucous din is unnerving and an upwelling of fear rises from the base of my spine. I lay down my paddle, and in an effort to quell the oncoming panic I do the only thing that I can think of, the single savvy act that might ease the tension in this encounter. I begin to sing.



This was a response to animal threat that I discovered some years earlier when, cross-country skiing along a snow-covered stream in the northern Rockies, I emerged from the woods into a small, frozen marshland - and abruptly found myself three ski-lengths away from a mother moose. She'd been feeding with her child among the low willows. The moose looked up as startled as I; she was facing me head-on, her nostrils flaring, her front legs taut, leaning forward. Her eyes were locked on my body, one ear listening toward me while the other was rotated backward, monitoring the movements of her calf. My senses were on high alert, yet somehow I wasn't frightened or even worried; I took a deep breath and then found myself offering a single, sustained mellifluous note, a musical call in the middle part of my range, holding its pitch and its volume for as long as I could muster. As my voice died away, I already sensed the other's muscles relaxing. Drawing another breath, I sang out the same note again, relaxing my own body and pouring as much ease as I was able into the tone. Within a moment the moose leaned her head back down and casually began nibbling the willow tips. I sounded that liquid tone one last time, finally pushing off with my poles and slipping on past. The simple appropriateness of what I'd done slowly made itself evident to my thinking mind as I glided through the woods. For the timbre of a human voice singing a single sustained note carries an abundance of information for those whose ears are tuned to such clues - information about the internal state of various organs in the singer's body, and the relative tension or ease in that person, the level of aggression or peaceful intent.



And so, floating in my kayak, assailed by a chorus of bellowing grunts sounding from throats large enough, it seemed, to swallow me in a few gulps, I find myself singing back. Although not, this time, in a particularly mellifluous tone. If I had offered a gentle, calm note, the sea lions would never have heard me through the clamor of their own growling, and in any case I could never have generated such a soothing tone from within my already freaked-out organism. Instead, the musical tone that I utter forth is as loud and as guttural as I can manage, with my head thrown back in order to open my throat – a kind of low-pitched, gargling howl: “Aaarrrrrrggghhh..., Aaaaarrrrggghhh..., Aaaarrrrggghhh...” I hold each guttural howl for as long as I can, finally pausing to draw a deep breath, at which point I notice, amazed, that the sea lions have stopped growling. I lower my head to look at them; they’re now sniffing the air toward me, shoving one another to get a better glimpse of this large, brightly colored duck that can make such an ugly racket. My ears pick up the sound of fifty or sixty noses snorting and snorfling (and sometimes sneezing) as they sniff the breeze. My own nostrils can hardly sort the thickly mingled scents of salt spray and sea lion breath and the dense, floating beds of kelp as I take up the paddle and begin, like a fool, paddling closer. My own creaturely curiosity has gotten the better of my reason; I cannot help myself, enthralled by my proximity to these breathing bodies so weirdly akin to, and yet so different from, my own. The smell of them grows steadily stronger as I ease my kayak between the strands of kelp. When I get within about twenty-five feet of the rocks, that large male on the lower ledge – the same bull who initiated the alarm the first time – lifts his torso up on his flippers and starts bellowing. Straightaway a few others join in, and by the time I’ve laid the paddle across the kayak nearly all of the sea lions are hollering bloody murder. And so I am gulping air and mustering myself and about to launch into my own guttural harangue when, directly between me and the sea lions, the water’s surface begins to bubble. Small bubbles at first, which soon give way to larger ones, and then a huge upwelling of water as, without any further warning, a gargantuan body **blasts!** Through the surface into the sky – flying on outstretched wings that, as I stare wide-eyed, resolve themselves into the splayed pectoral fins of a humpback whale.

The whale twists almost belly side up before its bulk crashes down, drenching me with spray and sending a huge wave rolling over the hull of the kayak, slamming the paddle against my life jacket and almost sweeping it away before I catch hold of its end and drag it back. In front of the kayak, the long, pleated folds of the humpback’s underside are slipping slowly beneath the surface... and then the whale is gone.



I grab the paddle and desperately begin to back-paddle, thinking that the giant may try to capsize me, although after a few moments I realize that I’ve no idea what the whale is up to, or where in the depths it might now be. So I brace the paddle across the hull, gripping it tight with both hands, and simply wait. After a minute I hear the *pip, pip, pip* of tiny bubbles breaking, and by the time I locate them the water to my left begins boiling and then upwelling, and before I can prepare myself that massive bulk explodes through the surface like a fever – mad hallucination – barely eight feet from the kayak – right side up this time and parallel to the boat although lunging in the opposite direction, immense pectoral fins dangling before it slams down. The swell catches my boat sideways and damn near flips me over, except that I counter-lean hard to the left, rocking back up in time to glimpse an incongruously small, almost human-like eye peering at me as it glides just above the waterline. The whale spouts, and a breeze blows its exhaled spray into my face, drenching my already sopped body, and then I’m overcome by the rousing stench of its breath. “Sewage - like,” I think at first, but then it occurs to me, “What a blessing to inhale the breath of a humpback whale!” The smell’s intensity is jangling my neurons as the enormous apparition slides back down, leaving only a slim dorsal fin visible for a last moment before it vanishes beneath the surface.



I am left stunned, my entire body shaking in the kayak – the visual field trembling around me as I try to calm the tremor in my muscles. I feel as though the great god of the deep has just intervened between me and the sea lions, surfacing as a kind of warning as if to say, Not too close, mortal, to these *kinfolk of mine!* Unable to quell the shaking, I lower my head to offer a mumbled prayer of thanks to these waters – but jerk my head back up as a loud **SPLASH!** Sounds in my ears. My eyes widen in alarm. For the sea lions, apparently agitated by this visitation from the humpback god, are starting to dive off the rocks en masse. They're sliding down from the upper ledges and waddling over to the lowermost brink, where they're now plunging into the water in bunches, clusters of them tumbling into the brine and swiftly surfacing, and then surging – with their torsos half out of the water and with a holy clamor of guttural bellowing – straight toward **me!**

There is simply no way that I can escape their rapid advance: the fluid sea, after all, is their primary element, and not the customary milieu of this oafish stranger struggling to maneuver in his plastic, prosthetic body. I do not know by what wisdom, or folly, my animal organism chooses what to do next. Of course there are not many options, and no time to think: my awareness can only look on in bewilderment as my arms fly up over my head and I begin, in the kayak, to dance. More precisely, my upraised, extended arms begin to sway conjointly from one side to the other, with my wrists and my splayed fingers arcing to the right, then to the left, then to the right, to the left, right, left, right ...

As soon as I begin these contortions, the clamoring sea lions rear back in the water and fall silent, as their heads begin swiveling from one side to the other, tracking my hands with their eyes. Astonishing! Seventy or eighty earnest mammalian faces twisting this way and then that way, this way and that, over and again. And all in perfect unison, like a half – submerged chorus line. After a couple of minutes I drop my hands down to take up the paddle – but straightaway the sea lions start bellowing and surging forward. No! My hands fly back up and I resume the dance, my taut arms swaying left, then right, then left again as the whiskered crowd falls silent, their necks craning from side to side yet again, over and over.

My arms keep up their ritual, the kayak rocking this way and that. As I consider the situation, my happy relief at finding a way to save my skin gradually yields to a deepening dismay. For I can find no way out.

Whenever I even start to lower my hands the dark-eyed multitude lunges forward – so halting my dance is not an option. I examine my predicament from every possible angle, but cannot discern any exit strategy. And so I keep my arms high, inclining from one side to the other, smiling rather feebly at all these attentive, whiskered faces while the muscles in my upper arms grow more and more exhausted. After a long while the ache in my shoulders has become intolerable; I can no longer think. My right arm is giving out.

Slowly I bring that arm down while the left keeps up the rhythm. The sea lions, weaving from side to side, are now focused on the single, swaying metronome of my left arm. My right shoulder rests. An idea dawns. My gaze stayed fixed on the sea lions off in front of me as with my right fingers I begin groping around for the shaft of the paddle. On finding it I heft it slightly, balancing it as best I can in an underhand grip. Then, awkwardly, with my left arm rocking side to side above my head, I cross my right arm in front of my chest and begin rowing as best I can on the left. My right hand scrapes the unwieldy paddle against the left side of the kayak to get some traction. I do all this blindly, for my eyes are locked on the weaving faces of the sea lions, my left arm still swinging above my head. Slowly, arduously, my clumsy rowing manages to maneuver the kayak around the right flank of the floating mob. When most of the sea lions are off to the side, I bring down my left hand as well, clasping the shaft now with both sets of fingers, and begin paddling, *hard*, into the open water, without looking back. After seven or eight minutes I sneak a quick glance behind me: sure enough, a few sea lions are still trailing me, but at a respectful distance, and with little more than their noses above the surface...

Something in that charged encounter changed me. I notice it, sometimes, when I'm playing with my two children, or when the howling of coyotes wakes me in the middle of the night. My confrontation with the sea mammals brought home to me something crucial about language – something mightily different from what I'd learned at school and at college. I'd been taught that meaningful speech is that trait that most clearly distinguishes us humans from all the other animals. We have meaningful speech, while other creatures do not.



But my unnerving meeting, in the wet, with the humpback and the mob of sea lions showed me otherwise. It made evident, in a way I could no longer ignore, that there exists a primary language that we two – leggeds share with other species.

When we speak of “language,” we speak of an ability to communicate, a power to convey information across a thickness of space and time, a means whereby beings at some distance from one another nonetheless manage to apprise each other of their current feelings or thoughts. As humans, we rely upon a complex web of mostly discrete, spoken sounds to accomplish our communication, and so it’s natural that we associate language with such verbal intercourse. Unfortunately, this association has led many to assume that language is an exclusive attribute of our species – we, after all, are the only creatures that use words – and to conclude that all other organisms are entirely bereft of meaningful speech. It is an exceedingly self-serving assumption.

Other animals, commonly possessed of senses far more acute than ours, may have much less need for a purely conventional set of signs to communicate with others of their species, or even to glean precise information from members of other species. My encounter with the sea creatures had initiated me into a layer of language much older, and deeper, than words. It was a dimension of expressive meanings that were directly felt by the body, a realm wherein the body itself speaks – by the tonality and rhythm of its sounds, by its gestures, even by the expressive potency of its poise. A near catastrophic confrontation had plunged me into a space of earnest communication that enfolded entirely without words, a carnal zone of articulations broadly shared across species. It was a dimension wherein my verbal self was hardly present, but where an older, animal awareness came to the fore, responding spontaneously to the gestures of these other animals with hardly any interpolation by my “interior” thinking mind. It was rather as if my body *itself* was doing the thinking, trading vocal utterances and physical expressions back and forth with these other smooth – skinned and sentient creatures. Their flippers and fins were obviously shaped to a liquid medium very different from my own primary element, yet the most basic sensations of threat, or calm, or pleasure could still be swiftly exchanged – via the tautness or relaxation of various muscles, coupled

with the tone of our uttered sounds – by virtue of our mutual existence as kinetic and sonorous beings inhabiting the same biosphere.

Sure, we were all mammals – the sea lions, the whale, and I – yet the sense I was left with was of a still more basic commonality or community of bodies, indeed of a communication shared as well with the waves shuddering under the kayak and splashing their speech upon the rocks. To the fully embodied animal *any* movement might be a gesture, and *any* sound may be a voice, a meaningful utterance of the world. And hence to my own creaturely flesh, as well, everything speaks!



Certain sounds that reach our ears convey the felt intent of other persons, while certain other, rumbling sounds bespeak a change in the weather. A rippling sequence of whistling tones expresses the exuberance felt by a thrush as the sun climbs above the horizon; other tones convey the dark magic of the night itself, speaking through the hissing tires on wet pavement.

Our human conversations are regularly influenced by this carnal layer of language, the apparent meaning of a friend’s phrase altering with the pace of her speaking. The tenor of a spoken exchange may be transformed, without either of us noticing, when a break in the winter clouds allows the sun to spill its song over the muted hues of the city street where we stand, or by an abrupt and escalating argument of honking vehicles on the same avenue.



I began to notice this animal dimension in my own speaking – conscious now not only of the denotative meaning of my terms, but also of the gruff or giddy melody that steadily sounds through my phrases, and the dance enacted by my body as I speak – the open astonishment or the slumped surrender, the wary stealth or the lanky ease. Trying to articulate a fresh insight, I feel my way toward the precise phrase with the whole of my flesh, drawn toward certain terms by the way their texture beckons dimly to my senses, choosing my words by the way they fit the shape of that insight, or by the way they finally taste on my tongue as I intone them one after another. And the power of that spoken phrase to provoke insights in those around me will depend upon the timbre of my talking, the way it jives with the collective mood or merely jangles their ears.

Such was the linguistic dimension into which I was borne by that meeting with the lions of the sea – an initiation seared into my memory by the shock of being swamped by a humpback whale, and by the exchange of fetid breath with that wild intelligence. I now found myself more porous to other shapes, to smooth – surfaced desks and motley dogs, more aware of the conversation my animal body was carrying on with the other bodies around it, how it tensed in certain office buildings and loosened in dialogue with adobe walls. I noticed the skin on my skull tightening under the hum of fluorescent lights, and – once while cycling – felt my shoulder muscles open and expand as a red-tailed hawk took wing from a passing telephone pole. I heard more keenly how much my voice borrowed the rolling lilt of the person I was talking to, or took on the staccato stiffness of her syllables, and I noticed that she, too, was infected by the inflections of my voice, such that each conversation was also a kind of singing to one another, like two black –birds trading riffs between the cattails – or like two humpbacks sending their eerie glissandos back and forth through the depths.

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David Abram is an ecologist, anthropologist, and environmental philosopher who lectures and teaches widely around the world. He is the author of *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (just published by Pantheon Books) and *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, for which he received, among other awards, the Lannan Literary Award for Nonfiction. David is co –founder and director of the Alliance for Wild Ethics (AWE), <http://www.wildethics.org>, an organization exploring the ways in which sensory perception, poetics, and wonder inform our relation with the animate earth. His writings on the cultural causes and consequences of environmental disarray are published in numerous magazines and scholarly journals. He lives with his family in the foothills of the southern Rockies.

