

Reflections on the Seagulls at Baker Beach

As I sat on the sand composing a new piece for triple ocarina called Kanaha for the boardsailing spot in Maui where the waves meet the wind, a flock of seagulls came diving from behind my head. They were kinetic and seemed agitated.

As I focused in on a couple that were the most frenetic one of them did a complete 360 degree spin in the air quicker than an eyeblink. I was startled and at the same time amazed. Then I noticed that a number of others were also spinning and more than once in a row - maybe. It is hard to decipher more than one at the speed they were spinning but it is possible it was a double spin. While in the midst of flying and spinning they were darting left and right, high and low quicker than I have ever seen gulls move.

I started to wonder if something was going on especially when I noticed how many gulls were traveling together in this pack. I have spent many hours over the years at Baker Beach which is just a mile or so south of the Golden Gate Bridge as it looms majestically over the the narrowed passage leading into San Francisco Bay. In those hours I have never seen close to such a large pack of gulls in the sky there. They were making a lot of gull noise which contributed to the eerie feeling I was getting that something was wrong. Potential scenarios starting popping into my head. In order of appearance they began with the idea that the gulls that were spinning were feeling especially free and in awe at their ability to fly and feel the wind. Then I thought maybe instead they were exhibiting neurotic behavior brought about by their habitat slowly being destroyed by humans. The toxics we make and expel into the air the ground and the water were affecting their behavior in unpredictable ways. This brought to mind *The End of Nature*, a book by Bill Mckibbin in which he argues that there is now a question about each cloud and raindrop that we experience as to whether they are there because of natural processes - an independent existence apart from humans - or due to the mix of chemicals we have injected into the atmosphere. "Instead of a world where rain has an independent and mysterious existence, the rain has become a a subset of human activity - a phenomenon like smog or commerce . . ." Then I was jolted to my senses by two of the gulls fighting in mid-air. I had never seen this before and as they crashed down into the water in an angry embrace I felt sadness for a moment. The group of seagulls seemed to be gravitating over towards the south end of the beach near a couple people moving about in what appeared to be strange ways. Then it occurred to be that maybe the whole thing - the darting, the spinning, the fighting and the large numbers had merely to do with food. I couldn't tell what the humans were doing but most of the gulls were eventually landing pretty close to them so maybe the birds were being given food and when it comes to gulls we know what they means - focused frenetic behavior.

Somehow that made me feel a little better. We are all animals and we have to eat to survive, so the gulls and us are not much different, except for the fact that we have the power of extinction over them and their animal friends, while they don't have the same power over us. One species knighted with that ability is probably quite enough. Then I had the thought that maybe those people had put drugs in the food as an experiment to see if it affected the gulls. Clearly it was having a strange affect of disorientation on the poor creatures as they took off again and again to dart and spin three-sixties and maybe seven-twenties in a flick of an instant.

On the one hand I have the idea that animals are so separate from us in experience that giving them a human drug would have no effect, and on the other it is clear that of course a strong drug would have an effect as I remembered

friends blowing pot smoke into the face of the dog sitting at their feet and her ensuing behavior.

I decided to get up and walk the 300 yards down the beach and see for myself what the situation was. As it turns out they were a couple a kids building a large castle with a big moat. I asked them if they knew why so many gulls were congregating in the area around them. They were a little busy to put too much thought into it but one finally offered that maybe there was some food around. I walked back and resumed working on Kanaha, soon forgetting about the gulls as I got absorbed in the sound of the triple ocarina (or huacha as it is also known). Getting colder as the sun was setting and being obscured by clouds, I packed up and walked to the car forgetting to look back at the birds and leaving behind the reason for their strange behavior.

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