Zoe Johnsen

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The Spontaneous Sublime: Why Getting Lost is Good for your Existential Health

Apparently they're called "moose-jams"—this stop-and-start line of traffic I found myself in, along a winding backroad of Grand Teton National Park. Unbeknownst to me at the time, I was about to experience what the Park Foundation (GTNPF) calls a "moment that matters:" a sight of majestic wildlife, to remind visitors of America's wild beauty, contained within this park crosscut by paved roads and rumbling cars ("Protecting Wildlife and Natural Resources," sect. "A Call to Action," n.d.). Stuck in a line of these cars, it takes us a few minutes to understand exactly what's happening; then, seeing camera lens pointed out open windows, our dawning realization builds with excitement and anticipation. I crane my neck from the backseat and catch a glimpse of two brown bodies, one smaller than the other. The car ahead of us shifts into gear and, finally, there they are, in full glory: a sweet brown moose and her even sweeter baby calf, peacefully grazing on wildflowers right off the side of the pothole-marred road. We focus our own gazes and lens. They're just as picturesque as they should be, framed by the beautiful Teton mountain range. We each snap a quick photograph of the landscape, take in a breath of awe, then move along so the car behind us, the next group of curious visitors, has their chance.

I'd always had a romantic vision of the west, this great American frontier—snowcapped peaks and crystalline blue lakes, formidable and teeming with possibility. Such images seem

engrained in our collective American cultural consciousness, harking back to school narratives of Teddy Roosevelt and the early conservation movement. Indeed, it's during this era at the turn of the 19th century that western landscape photography also rose to prominence and became entangled with environmentalism and the formation of the first national parks, promoting all those romantic notions of the rugged, beautiful American wild. Once an uncharted borderland , known only by the likes of early explorers and fur-trappers, the west came into the sights of popular culture through the dissemination of these landscape photographs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This particular medium, Kevin DeLuca and Anne Demo (2000) argue, aided "in the construction of pristine wilderness as the sublime object of nascent environmentalism" (p. 242). Visions of towering mountains and sprawling valleys, devoid of people yet full of natural abundance, were captured in photograph, inspiring not only conservationists but also the average armchair tourist. However, in this capturing of the west's geological grandeur for aesthetic viewing pleasure, the sublime is tempered, creating what DeLuca and Demo term the "domesticated sublime" (p. 248). Held in the hands of a distant viewer, the "spectacular" western landscape becomes merely "spectacle," leaving a sublime "in which comfort displaces risk as the spectator replaces the participant" (p. 249). Still-life photography provided, then, a pleasurable tourist gaze of the sublime, removed from the immediate senses and raw emotion of actual experience. It was a sublime that was framed, curated, and presented—and thus hollow.

The sublime, as formally detailed by philosopher Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century, is primarily an existential experience of human smallness, a complex emotional mixture of fear and pleasure born from direct confrontation with nature's immense power. It is a power that is much greater than us, living out our ephemeral human lives; it renders us insignificant, to

come face-to-face with mountains millions of years old, or lakes that stretch further than our myopic gazes can comprehend. There may be fear, here, but it is not unwelcoming. Rather, when our human frailty is made plain, it can be humbling, nearly a breath of relief, to be reminded that "our lives are not the measure of all things," as Alain De Botton (2002) so eloquently writes in his historical tracing of the sublime (p. 171). It is hard to imagine this vulnerability, such smallness, felt through landscape photographs, in which we are given "a god's eye view" (DeLuca & Demo, 2000, p. 248). Removed from grounded experience, the spectator of the sublime is made large, as he is seemingly able to hold nature within his hands, made for his viewing. This human-centric sublime of early landscape photography is not merely a relic of the past; it has more recently evolved into what Elizabeth Brunner and Veronica Dawson (2017) call the "recreational sublime." The authors contend that early landscape photography indeed formulated a technological sublime, in which nature is captured as "knowable, usable...predictable and controllable" (p. 391). They further argue that these origins have allowed for a new conception of sublime nature as "surmountable," visible in modern environmental media such as extreme sport documentaries, in which mountains are triumphantly scaled and harsh landscapes expertly traversed. Though spectator has become participant, the recreational sublime presents humans as limitless and nature as our playground, flipping Burke's original hierarchy and taming any sense of fear and vulnerability (Brunner & Dawson, 2017). Beyond being made secure and aesthetically pleasing, popular conceptions of the sublime have further rendered it conquerable, constructed for human satisfaction—the Grand Canyon as peered into from behind a guardrail, Mount Everest summited among a crowd, or a mighty moose caught in action from the safety of the car.

A day or two after our moose-jam moment, we happen upon a similar scene of a doe and fawn in the woods, just off-trail. The moose's much less iconic counterpart, the deer, yet the encounter seems to hold greater space in my nostalgic reminiscing. It happened out of nowhere, the first of us stopping suddenly with a finger to his lips; I nearly bump into him, as we gather close on the narrow trail and follow his gaze into the trees. We meet eyes with the doe and a hush falls over us, almost reverent, for the span of just a few heartbeats. She flicks her tail and the moment breaks. I exhale the gasp that had been trapped behind my ribcage. I'd grown up with deer my entire childhood, always in our backyard. These few intimate seconds are hardly a time I would expect to linger in my memory, but they have, still, many months later. The moose certainly has too, being emblematic of the west I'd imagined, something we'd all hoped to see during our trip. Despite this, despite the fact that the Park Service markets such iconic wildlife scenes like our moose photos, that simple doe and her fawn seem to have struck some different chord of meaning within me in a way I couldn't have expected. It was a moment borne of chance, fleeting and fragile and tinged with something close to sacred.

Chance, it seems, likes to follow us on this trip, or at least the opportunity to make meaning from it. We get lost on one of the park's most popular trails, again defying the plans constructed for us as visitors. I know I should probably be scared, maybe more worried than I am; we're separated from the rest of our group with no idea of where we're going beyond some vague destination of a waterfall, an unknown distance away, with only a few hours of sunlight left to warm our bare shoulders. Of the GTNPF's "10 Necessities for Your Summer Pack" (n.d.), we have approximately two and a half, though they will have to be shared among the three of us: one comically large apple for sustenance; half a bottle of water, as most of it had been gulped

down before we'd barely begun walking; and a single threadbare wool sweater for layering, should the weather turn. They're not great odds, viewed objectively. Yet, there we were, smiling into each other's smiles and skipping along barefoot over rocks and tree roots. I do voice an anxious thought every now and then, but they become less serious as time goes on, more easily brushed off with a laughing shrug. It seems we are much too busy taking in every shade of green, or the way the lake water ripples and swells in the occasional gust of wind. We are marveling at each different wildflower alongside the trail, as I pluck yet another from the grass to tuck behind my hair; the blossoms keep falling out in our joyous movements that are still tinged with just a bit of haste as the sun continues its inevitable path downwards.

Sometimes I feel I am most myself in this rambunctious, childlike wandering. It's as if there's no other place I could possibly be but lost on this trail, a peaceful lucidity radiating out from some core of my being that ensures all my steps are well-placed, my laughter loud and bright and easy. It's as if I am coming home to myself, amidst this landscape that keeps morphing from open flower-filled fields to forests of aspen to rugged lake bluffs.

Research on the emotional underpinnings of tourist experiences actually provide a nice, succinct term for this feeling: existential authenticity. Jillian Rickly-Boyd (2013) argues that this sort of emotion-focused authenticity is based on a balance between "self-constraint and spontaneity;" when the latter can flourish, such as during the whims of travel, the individual can act more "in line with their true feelings and authentic self" (p. 682). Forging ahead on that endless trail, questioning our decisions at every trail marker and lacking food, water, and cell service, I had relinquished the nagging voice in the back of my mind from her nearly full-time position. I gave myself over to an optimistic inevitable of safe return, and meanwhile made peace with the present moment filled with pines, glacial waters, and distant peaks. It was a collective

submission; the carefree joy of the people alongside me only reinforced my openness. I suppose I had also found what Rickly-Boyd terms "intrapersonal authenticity," a genuineness desired from other travelers with whom you can create shared experience and meaning (p. 683). Perhaps it was because I already knew these two people well, knew we all loved each other and loved the world at large, with all its mountains and rivers, or that we all agreed the earth is best experienced in bare feet—but I certainly did feel a shared "authentic Being" between us, from our frequent celebrations of every beautiful sight to the unspoken improvisation of life as experienced on this trail. Lost amongst the trees, untethered to any sort of logical plan, I felt an airborne sense of aliveness and connection, indescribable except that it seemed palpable in the sunlit air, as if I could reach out and touch it in any given moment of these long golden hours; it was a nebulous sense of interconnectivity, to the earth as felt beneath my blackened feet, or the immediate love contained within our shared wide-eyed gazes of wonder out to the mountains and back to each other.

Park management research has tried to pin down these more abstract meanings—what exactly makes a landscape come alive in individuals' subjectivities, or how destinations presented as sublime can actually invoke that feeling. One possible answer comes from Mary Farber and Troy Hall's (2007) study of tourists' "extraordinary experiences" along Alaska's Dalton Highway, which found that scenery, particularly mountains and water, and especially when associated with social cohesion and active recreation, "generated significantly higher levels of positive affect" than other variables (p. 264). Here is where we land squarely within the GTNPF's intentions: providing a beautiful, scenic, often breathtaking natural environment, with plenty of managed trails and recreational activities to share with friends and family. I certainly set out with these motivations in mind, likely the same as most visitors that summer. However,

the authors also found that novelty and the unexpected, "serendipitous events or constellations of factors largely outside managerial control" were also significant predictors of "special experiences" (p. 268). So begins the issue of managing a national park—a uniquely spectacular environment, visited by millions of people each with their own complexities of mind, emotion, and meaning-making. Meaning that may emerge from a string of coincidences, even unlucky chances turned into a wonderful performance of spontaneity.

I've come to find out that the very trail we'd gotten lost on had been recently revamped as part of the GTNPF's multi-million dollar "Jenny Lake Renewal Project." The project included efforts to "reduce ambiguity by creating suggested directional trails" and designate resting areas "to take in the stunning views" ("Jenny Lake Renewal Project," n.d.). I can't help but laugh, reading this after the fact. Perhaps we'd been silly and aimless, missing those suggested trails. We had just looked at each other, blank faced, every time we passed one of those wooden markers that seemed to leave much detail to be desired. Lacking direction, we'd forged on in clueless optimism, finding our own resting spots along the way; the first had been discovered by clambering downslope of the trail and onto a concrete embankment, probably part of some drainage system. It was the perfect spot to sit and dangle our feet in the frigid lake water. Another break was had at the dead-end of a short off-shoot trail; we'd sat upon a fallen tree and chatted about what we wanted out of life, arms draped easily around each other's shoulders. Though our experience seems to have flouted the park service's costly, managed expectations, I'm not complaining. That unscripted afternoon still ranks among my top ten days thus far, likely due precisely to its spontaneous creation. As Rickly-Boyd (2013) points out in her research, authentic experience is created through active performance, as it suffuses the physical landscape

with personal meanings. The day was not meaningful simply because it occurred against a stunning backdrop, or due to any specific efforts by the GTNPF to enhance visitor experience; its blissful character owed itself to a myriad of personal and interpersonal factors, predicated on serendipity, and perhaps a bit of alarmed adrenaline, allowing me to revel in magnificent landscapes with as equal delight as my company.

The question at hand, then: did this wandering revelry, with all its nebulous but profound meanings, come close to some sort of experience of the sublime? As active participants, sun on our skin and full of giddy trepidation, did we animate the technological sublime of photographs, submitting to nature's indifferent force rather than aiming to conquer it? It is helpful to turn to "awe," a complex emotional state that has become a near psychological correlate to the philosophical sublime, particularly in research on outdoor leisure. Awe, like the sublime, has been difficult to pin down in discrete terms; in-depth empirical research only truly began in 2003 with Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt's seminal paper, in which they define awe based on two key features: "perceived vastness, and a need for accommodation" (p. 297). The latter concept is significant—there is a *need* or desire to understand, but this feat is not necessarily accomplished. Thus, at "the upper reaches of pleasure and on the boundary of fear" lies awe, as does the sublime—the confusing, exhilarating feeling of trying to make sense of something far too big for us to ever comprehend (Keltner & Haidt, 2003, p. 297). Susan Chen and Myriam Mongrain (2020) further this conception of awe by arguing that it is fundamentally self-transcendent, as the immediate sensory recognition of the natural world's immensity engenders a perceptual shift, "from being egocentric to a wider frame" (p. 3). We are thus brought back to Burke's sublime feeling of self-diminishment, as well as Rickly-Boyd's (2013) existential authenticity that

overcomes the confines of rational self-concern. Chen and Mongrain assert that the "small self," central to awe, "becomes a conduit to social connection [and] oneness with environments," pointing the individual "to the grand scheme of existence" (2020, p. 3). The sight of mountains, the Milky Way, or vast fields of wildflowers—we pale in mortal comparison, yet still rejoice in all that we are so privileged to encounter, in this inexplicable, unpredictable beauty of existence that is shared among millions. However fearful or threatening it may seem to be rendered insignificant, there is still delight in this experience. There is still laughter even as that last bite of our apple is taken with an unknown number of miles left to walk. There are bigger things than this worry—we are among glorious green grass that will outlast our short lives, in the shadow of rocks that used to be buried miles beneath the earth, some billion or so years before the events of our today. As we wander, a couple passes us on the trail; we all smile to each other in slightly breathless greeting, then return our gazes back to the entrancing world around us.

On the last night of our trip, I find myself in a vast field, under a lightning storm and contemplating the origins of religion. It's dark beneath the blanket of this wide horizon, until lightning strikes, once, brief, cracking open the sky. We scream, almost as if on instinct. Will we be burnt to embers, huddled beneath this metal umbrella? Fat raindrops strike my exposed skin as they begin to increase in speed and frequency. I remain focused on the sky, ignoring my muddy and soaking wet feet, cut up from running through bramble. After an indeterminate amount of time comes the next searing shot—I yell again, and meet the matching grin of a friend so close to me. We don't understand exactly what it is that we're feeling, driven to exclamation with each exhilarating shock, paralyzed with awe, but our shared glance says: *I know. I know you feel this too; it's indescribable, but it's amazing*. Standing here, watching this elemental,

unpredictable, raging interplay of electricity, I suddenly feel connected to vast swaths of humanity, unwittingly. As if I am a little dot of a human tethered to all who have stood underneath this same horizon, all who have ever stood in any empty place beneath the night sky, looked up, and perhaps believed there might be something out there bigger than us.

This pure, undiluted experience of reality, running through mud and rain and into beautifully terrifying danger—it's not something the park service could have ever planned for me, nor something I could have expected for myself in this five-day road trip out west. It was not a picture-perfect scene of water and mountains as framed in a constructed overlook. Screaming with friends in a dark field under a summer thunderstorm is not marketed as a "moment that matters." But there I was, feeling so merely and marvelously human. It was a profound sense of *being,* in its totality, born from spontaneous lived circumstance as I surrendered my fate to the hands of nature, to her raindrops and unforgiving earth. I was saved from being too cold, with the other warm bodies under the umbrella—saved from being too lonely, when we are all so equally small.

I think back to that deer and fawn as an equally poignant sublime as the lightning storm, if less intense. It was, too, a startling encounter, unexpected and making my heart beat just a bit louder. That brief locked stare between us two warm-blooded animals forced an understanding onto me: this was their territory. The trail I stood on was but an impermanent manifestation of the human propensity for development. We are the ones caught in the doe's watch, vulnerable, humbled into silence. This landscape was built for me, I was directed here, but it is not mine, in that grand scheme of things. It is the understanding that the world exists not just before us but beyond us, in a way that we cannot comprehend. We are left with tantalizing glimpses into that

mystery and, if we are lucky, someone there beside us with whom we can share this wonder, share an easy smile of being tiny together, delighting in every bit of this raw existence however it may show itself.

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