



Clarification regarding gophers: Now that I think about it, they might have been ground squirrels. Most ground squirrels will not try to attack a snake, but in a certain area of California, there are ground squirrels who attack rattlesnakes to defend themselves. Experimenters raised ground squirrels for two generations in an area without rattlesnakes, and then reintroduced snakes. What they found is that these ground squirrels were even more aggressive toward rattlesnakes than those who had grown up in their natural context.

I sometimes think I'm like one of these ground squirrels when considering my own reactive tendencies. Technically speaking, shyness (for example) is not unnatural, but sometimes a reaction can be completely out of balance with what the situation calls for. And when a particular external trigger is removed, it doesn't necessarily reduce the reactivity -- rather I can often find some other thing that looks similar to latch onto.

(Question: Is there some reason why naturalness is important to acknowledge in situations where one feels stressed, disconnected, squelched by addictive tendencies? It seems like even if you don't say it's "unnatural", I don't find it particularly relevant to call it "natural" either, but is Stim trying to point at something by reminding us of naturalness in these situations?)

Paraphrasing Stim's homework assignment: What can you find in yourself that is self-defeating? Things that look perverse, like troublemakers -- what more can you learn about these?

This morning while sitting, it became apparent that our obstacles are also our perfect teachers -- not just because we can learn from our mistakes, or as a way to learn to appreciate things better, but because they can teach us about the enlightened nature of all things, they are directly that nature, which is the reality of all things. This was a little different from taking the wall as the perfect teacher, an object (or relationship to an object) which has a neutral character. It was a fleeting impression, probably because I jumped into "trying to remember" too quickly (a self-defeating gesture?), hoping to describe and preserve it to myself so that I'd have something to say for the homework assignment (!).

This evening, Mits and I went to see the Coen brothers' latest movie, A Serious Man, and after leaving the theatre, I suddenly realized that I kind of like New York after all. We've been living here for 6 years, and during most of the time here, I've been thinking of the city as a modern day labor camp for office workers - living on top of a garbage heap with horrible desk chairs that ruin your body, a horribly unjust economy, an infrastructure designed to pummel life and nature as it tries to take root. There are probably good things about New York, I know I'm not taking a good attitude about being here. But after watching the movie, it started to seem like if I could learn to appreciate NY, I'd be more able to appreciate any place I lived, and that appreciation could enrich my experience of life.

(BTW, A Serious Man might be a good class trip! If anyone else has seen it, maybe we could talk about it! The movie starts with a quote: "Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you" and then gets pretty elaborate after that.)

(Well, I haven't really done the homework yet, so I'll get started in a bit, but also noticed Eliza's pre-report and was thinking how funny it is that she mentioned the overlapping themes, and I was also thinking about Eliza's overlapping themes which she also raised in her naturalness report, which is also how the

third rabbi visit plays out in the movie, and also how the storylines play out in Seinfeld episodes...etc! This issue of correspondences seems to come up very easily in literary forms and comedy).

The Homework: A couple weeks ago, I got a phone call from my sister -- her baby was in the hospital again. The symptoms were relatively mild -- a precautionary treatment and monitoring after surgery. Still, very stressful for her, I could hear it in her voice, and I ended up feeling guilty for not being able to visit and help out (I've been out of town more or less every weekend for the last month and will be again next month).

I bring it up because these guilty feelings overwhelmed my sense of myself and what life was about for four or five days after -- obsessive thoughts (about whether I could have done more, if it was unfair to expect more of me, if it was really my mom's fault for being so demanding, etc.) followed me everywhere (into practice, the work day, tai chi class, dinner, etc). It was pretty much non-stop for a few days, and even though there was a (mostly intellectual) part of me that knew I would eventually get over it, it felt quite unshakable at the time, and I certainly could feel myself falling into the usual avoidance/over-compensation patterns when calling or emailing my sister but also when involved in completely unrelated tasks.

It's been interesting to consider how coercive these guilty feelings can be, and how often they pop up in small and large ways. I've been noticing how many of my feelings of distraction or disconnection can be traced back to a sort of a sense of guilt. Even more "positive" feelings like pride or excitement can be traced back this way. The "curative" (more recently) has been to acknowledge those feelings, bear witness to them. Not to avoid or overcome or correct, but just to sink into them, to be present with them and also accept the possibility that I might indeed be "flakey" or whatever, but not buy into the idea of a continuing fact. And then sometimes it's possible to find an energetic sinking too (not that I'm trying to sink, but rather there's a sense of "oh right, I could try this which I somehow managed to forget until now"), into the belly (Gaya's base?) so that I'm not thinking with my head so much. From that vantage point, the guilt/self no longer seems so domineering.