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The Surprise of the Unknown:

A Beaver Story

For weeks, my sleep had been broken from looping worries—worries about my finances, my job instability, and unsettling changes in my personal life. None of these issues were imminently threatening to me, but I didn't have much control over their final outcomes. So, the fear of not being able to manipulate my future triggered negative emotions. To process these feelings, I started taking runs on a three-mile path that circled the lake close to my house.

Each morning, I alternated between jogging and grueling wind sprints before finally slowing to a walk, in quiet approach to a beaver lodge built into the bank of the lake. I had read if a lodge is occupied, fresh green plants grow on the top of its cone. This particular lodge had sported its verdant flag for several seasons, but on my runs around the lake, I had rarely sighted a beaver.

Once, I was lucky. When I came to a stop where the trail curves above the lodge, I looked down, not really expecting to see anything. But to my surprise, a large male beaver was only about fifteen feet away, tearing a piece of vegetation from the bank. He was grunting like an old man as he pulled on the roots, and I had to hold my breath not to laugh. Then he dragged what he had broken free down to the water and dived in with it, bringing the food to his family underneath. Inside the cave, I could hear his kits whimpering like kittens.

It's easy to understand why Native Americans called the beaver "little people." The males can stand up to four feet tall, and their intelligent faces do sometimes look like aged humans, deep in thought. But when beaver are in the water, their grace of dive and tilt of tail is an animal beauty all their own.

This was a beauty I wanted to keep. Many times after that unexpected encounter, I tried to replicate that sighting by getting up early and taking my camera down to the beaver lodge. But on those days, I hadn't felt any urge—any expectancy of unknown good to come. Instead, much in the same way I was working to control my own circumstances, I was trying to manipulate this outcome with the beaver. I was open only to what I wanted to see—beaver playing and working in the water that I could capture in the digital images of my camera.

But I could not even control my own emotions, and they were more heightened when on one visit to the lake, instead of the beaver I wished to see, I witnessed devastation. The lake was being drained, and dredgers, with their huge machinery, gouged into the exposed earth. When I walked further down the path to the beaver lodge, I found it dry and abandoned, and the green that had so recently sprouted from its top was already brown and brittle.

My worries looped as my questions swirled. What had happened to the kits? Did they survive? Did any of the beaver get out alive before the chaos of

engines invaded their home and bulldozed their peace?

For all kinds of irrational reasons, displacement of anything or anyone has frequently been a trigger of negative emotions in me. When an acquaintance's house caught fire and burned to the ground, destroying everything she and her family owned, I felt sick for her. Although my own home hadn't been consumed by flames like hers or destroyed by big machines like the beavers', just knowing of these displacements left me feeling vulnerable, as well.

To mentally acknowledge that none of us can predict what lies ahead did little to comfort my emotions or calm my insecurities. Even smaller problems—with their uncontrollable variables—were, to me, frightening dislocations. And my destructive responses to the larger and ongoing uncertainties of my own life were churning into my own chaos. My fears were like huge, invasive machines, sucking the life-water from me, leaving me dry and brittle.

Something had to change. I had to change. Through this decision for good, I slowly began to reconstruct my emotional reactions, first by recognizing negative triggers, and then by practicing positive responses to them. And through this training of choosing better feelings, as my fears shriveled and shrank, I began to open to the possibility of unexpected adventures.

That is why one morning at 6:15 a.m., I obeyed an insistent inner urge to get up and get outside. As I dressed, I reminded myself of what a friend had challenged me to believe: "The unknown is a source of freedom." I walked down to the lake, repeating this mantra to myself while feeling my volition move me toward its promise.

The Virginia mountains in May—the aroma-therapy of early honeysuckle, the bird-song, the plum-bloom of redbud trees. Was the glory of all this what my urge was calling me to experience? The lake had been transformed from a muddy and marred excavation into a reservoir of calm, clear water. My happiness that the machinery was gone and the lake was alive energized me to push myself into exhilarating wind sprints. But then, as the path brought me close to the beaver lodge, I slowed to a walk.

Triggers project predictions of bad outcomes and feed fears of events that have not yet happened. While under trigger-fire, the present is riddled with apprehensions of the future. We are not happy now because we're afraid we won't be happy later. But being open to the positive possibility of the unknown frees us to anticipate good and then to enjoy the surprise of each form of good as it comes.

Standing on the lake path, looking at that beaver lodge, I was surprised by good. The lodge had been rebuilt. No, not just rebuilt. It was twice its previous size. And a victory flag of green vegetation billowed from its top.

My breathing pulsed in thankful inhaleds, and although I didn't see any beaver, I started my run again, elated. But when I turned into the next finger of the lake, I skidded to a gravel-spitting stop. Down below me was a second, brand new beaver lodge. And a full grown beaver, carrying what looked like a small tree in his mouth, was swimming up to the lodge. The beaver positioned his tree limb precisely where he wanted it and then navigated to the far bank

for more materials. I slowly slid down to sit on the trail, amazed that my loud halt hadn't been heard. In the woods, silence is seeing. The beaver returned with another limb in his mouth, and for the next twenty minutes, I watched him construct his home.

Then, as I was about to leave, another surprise surfaced—a juvenile beaver. Perhaps she had grown from one of the mewling kits. Beaver stay close to their parents for two years, and colonies can be as large as thirteen. Maybe this family had broken off from the other clan—situating the new real estate close enough to kin to be neighborly but far enough apart that food supplies would stay plentiful. Even though only the large male and the smaller juvenile were in view, I surmised there were more beaver in the lodge below.

A rising all-is-well lifted me to my feet. That time the male did hear me. Whacking his tail into the water, he warned his kit to dive for cover. The sound traveled like thunder all over the lake, bouncing off the mountains and then catching in the mists. But to me it wasn't a clap of warning; it was the crack of a morning filled with hope.

Why did this surprise beaver encounter comfort my worries and soothe my fears? And why, when I obey one urge and am rewarded, does this then prime me for more unseen adventures?

Perhaps if the little beaver man could speak to me, he would answer these questions—questions that don't loop with worry but instead arise from wonder. Would the beaver assure me that chaos is bounded by order? Would he tell me that what is displaced—if I am open to change—will be replaced with something unexpectedly better?

But I don't need the beaver to speak to me. His presence alone is affirmation of what I have been learning to trust: If I simply look toward good—without trying to predict what forms that good might take—then the unknown is, and will continue to be, a surprising source of freedom.