

## Attunement

Every writer has his rituals. Schiller's was to keep rotting apples in his desk drawer to inspire him with their smell. Mine was to sit on the bluff overlooking the pond in our backyard, in the Adirondack chair my grandfather had built, with an ice cream soda, paper, and a pencil. By the time the paper was full, the glass had been emptied and, having been placed on the ground in that condition some time since, generally full of ants. Ensnared in mosquito netting that hung from the tree branches above, I would have a clear view, during pauses in literary productivity, of the animals arriving to drink below, while at the same time being unseen by them, seated above their sight line as if in a blind. But if I simply sat still, even animals on the heights would often come quite close. More than once I had used this technique to catch injured wildlife or escaped semi-feral pets. Remain without moving and without holding tension in your body, and they would usually approach you. This was how we had acquired the flock of wild turkeys that would run up if they saw you, pecking on the front door to be fed, and the gangs of raccoons that came trick-or-treating every evening, barely backing up at all when you came out on the porch with dog chow for them. First you always had to establish a relationship of trust if you were going to connect with wildlife. I found this easiest to do with deer, possibly because, having raised orphan fawns for years, we always seemed to have a couple of them hanging around. This gave me an intuitive sense of their body language and way of thinking that facilitated communication with their wild cousins.

And so it was some years ago at a residential workshop in the Alexander Technique that I found myself in the company of a small herd of deer out in the woods that ringed our campus early one evening. There was a little clearing, half the size of a football field, flanked by the forest on the right and a raised, lightly wooded ridge behind which the sun was just beginning to set, bathing the whole in a somewhat subdued light. The deer and I were both at the near end,

aware of each other's presence mainly through audible cues and presumably, in their case, by scent as well, but we remained mutually invisible, neither making a move, until I decided to take a chance and show myself in an attempt to make contact. After advancing by two slow steps into the clearing, I then stood unmoving, waiting to see how they would react. Rather than bounding away, they didn't stir at all until, after a long minute or two, the lead deer left cover and stood on the verge of the meadow. I waited a while in turn, and then took one more step, not toward her but in parallel, continuing in the direction in which we were both going. After an interval that seemed appropriate to her, so did she.

As we progressed in this slow and stately dance, matching measured cadences in alternate turns, a sideways glance, taken with peripheral vision without turning my body and disquieting them, revealed that the rest of the herd was following, one by one, in line. Time seemed suspended, but at length we were nearing the far end, and, as the leader flagged her tail in signal, all the other deer suddenly darted ahead into the woods, following her. I turned back to recross the meadow and return to the campus, but then, hearing a sudden noise on my right, looked up to discover that my sylvan companions had regrouped on this other side. In this position they had made themselves vulnerable as they were now exposed to view from a distance, silhouetted by the setting sun. It was a rather imprudent thing to do, but so taken were they, apparently, by the chance to continue the dance that they were committing a most uncharacteristic indiscretion for a prey species. This time they led, and I answered by repeating their pattern. It went a little faster now, as it was dusk, and, with the moon not yet risen, we would soon lose sight of each other. But we were each sufficiently attuned to the other now that we could stay in step even in the waning light, and so we reached the end of the field together just as darkness fell. There was a snort of farewell; then they melted away into the forest, and I took the road back to the evening's presentation, which was to deal with the use of indirection and non-doing. These were the keys to acquiring the sense of physical empathy required between teachers and students for the

*practice of the Alexander Technique. But, it occurred to me, I had just conducted my own workshop on this topic, and had found that with attention to those very same methods, you could even foster a broader connection on other levels, in other contexts, with other species.*