

## **An Experimental Couplet**

By Stone Riley © 2017

From his blog “Stone Riley's Shoebox”

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It's sometimes said that song precedes the other forms of human speech. According to this idea, the first words spoken by our little babies, and probably the proto-speech of our early ancestors, can best be understood as song. For me this has always seemed like an interesting and worthwhile proposal but two experiences recently have made me want to make a case for poetry instead.

Three weeks ago I was standing on a hillside with a little child, a grandson just then coming into speech, hardly taller than my knee, when he looked down to the hillside's foot and saw his mother was arriving home. Everyone knows she is an excellent mother but this was the first moment when I understood she is a great hero to the boy.

I understood this by a poem that his heart gave to his lips, the one word “mommie” repeated several times, all with a consistent two-beat rhythm, rising out of whispered awe into heroic timbre, with the classic gesture of the speaker's arms rising and opening toward her.

*“mom-mie ... mom-mie ... Mom-Mie ... MOM-MIE”*

This was not the hill above Ithaca and not the battered ship of Odysseus blown into port below at home at last. Instead this was a city lot behind their house and the good woman was emerging from her car just then driven in beside the house, arriving from her day at work.

But our local city is an ancient landscape of steep hills beside a long deep water valley. This was one of countless lots where a little child must truly struggle climbing up to their back fence where he and I were standing. And our high perspective, with our location shaded by a big green summer tree but with the lady lit brightly in the sunny afternoon below, made her look quite far away. And the child's dramatic gesture even gave a small aesthetic revelation, reminding me that this universal reaching signal by a baby is also our classic human reaching toward a savior god.

So to my astonished eyes and ears this primordial moment was revealed to be a perfect poetic recitation. It's true his broad melodrama style is out of fashion now but an actor in Shakespeare's or Sophocles' company would have been glad to have it on their stage. Of course, for them the fine art in it would have been to struggle through the entangling confusions of adult life then finally arrive at the vivid perspective of the child. But still, I am

not here to grade the child's artistic achievement, only to propose that his behavior was poetry instead of song.

The difference between poetry and song is melody. And we may be accustomed to feeling that it is melody which can lift your heart or dash your hopes to dust within the time a few breaths take. But in that moment there my windows of perception were flung open, and ancient epics were summoned into view, by my grandchild calling to his mother with deep emotion and with a multi-layered rhythm but without melody.

The other recent happening was last Saturday, in a different setting, with a girl who looked about five years old. In this new moment I was watching the child's reactions while I improvised an experimental couplet. In general it was a sort of thing that I do now and then, trying to understand childhood thinking by saying something with the Childthink point of view, hoping for a bit of candid and informative chat. But this moment was a big step up, my first such attempt with a Childthink poem.

And I was on the spot, pointed at and asked for an instantaneous free sample poem by the impatient performer on a tiny stage at an audience participation intergenerational literature performance, in a small tent at a festival, where I had found myself among the front row audience along with my front row neighbor there, this unknown little girl. She had riveted my attention. The child was thinking very energetically, showing a remarkably active alert acuity for the performer's storytelling work.

So when I was suddenly pointed at to speak in this audience participation show, and told to speak a poem – which I felt as a proper challenge from my fellow performing artist on the stage – my curiosity demanded that I take a chance. The child was such an active thinker and so conscious in the moment. If I could instantly roll out perhaps a couplet that had the Childthink point of view and was seriously artistic, her reactions might confirm or deny my recent suspicion that infant humans know profound poetry.

So the couplet that came to me to recite last Saturday in the front row of this audience participation intergenerational thing was this:

“I went OUT to WALK be-SIDE the SHORE // the wind came and said “FOR-EV-ER MORE”

You understand that my occasional habit of talking to children in a Childthink mode, hoping to purchase some candid conversation, demands profundity. It's no good being stupid or inane. You must offer something interesting. You're bartering for an honest chat with someone who is rightly suspicious of your adult thinking. Not only are your kind of people habitually manipulative, but also adult humans even have a different set of instincts than a child. Or at least I think so.

I am a Darwinist. Darwinism says there was a natural way of human life, a stable way our ancestors lived on Earth for a quarter million years or so until the last few thousand years when we took up civilization. Any animal's mind is grown from the universal consciousness of energy and matter, given shape – that is to say, given the abilities and voices we call instincts – by each individual's chemical heritage from their parents, a heritage selected over many generations by the opportunities and requirements of the way their species lives. This enormous process of evolution on our Earth is fantastically creative so of course the instincts it has given human beings are richly complex and useful adaptations for our ancestral way of life in that quarter million years.

During the sixteen decades since Charles Darwin's books began appearing – thus sparking our development of this huge theory – much research in many fields has coalesced into it. Thus the Darwinist theory has become very useful for our understanding of life on Earth, including our understanding of ourselves. In particular, many lines of study have clarified that quarter million years or so when a stable way of human life shaped the instincts that we find in our minds today. It has now reached a point where a serious and careful amateur can be well enough informed to make credible speculations about our instincts.

So, one speculation I am offering is this: adults and pre-puberty children have different sets of instincts. (For an example showing this is possible, simply look at the different behaviors of a caterpillar and butterfly.) To picture how this happened for us, to picture our ancient way of human life, imagine a kind of camping trip that never ends. You and I live with a small family band who move from time to time around a territory, seeking limited resources that Nature makes available here and there. And sometimes we must push on to somewhere else.

It is true that in this setting people of all ages live together but adults and children face different filtering by evolutionary processes. Adults evolve mainly to create and nurture children while young children evolve mainly to personally survive and grow. So says my proposal. And if there is truth in this, the processes of evolution have given us different tool kits for thought and action during those different parts of our lives.

So there you can see the fuel of my burning curiosity to strike up candid conversations with these aliens in our bosom, our young children. I delight in teaching children well so I want to know what life is like for them, beyond my accustomed limited perspective.

“I went OUT to WALK be-SIDE the SHORE // the wind came and said “FOR-EV-ER MORE”

During the long minute when I first heard my fellow artist on the stage issue a bardic challenge, then decided I must accept it, then held up my open hands and cast my eyes back in my head to beg for patience, then crafted up a list of the couplet's technical requirements, then

felt the grinding of the mill come up to speed, then felt the couplet's arrival, then opened my mouth to speak, I was sweating bullets. I have been embarrassed in live performance art more than once before and I dread it.

One thing had been certain in the instant when I framed my technical requirement list. The couplet must breathe the heartbeat rhythm, the one-beat “da-DUM-da-DUM” that appeared in its first line so clearly. This was the tip top requirement on my list. If you want profundity and want it quickly then you must have beauty strong enough to compel the mind's participation. Yes, I know that first line is ugly and dead boring if you are adult. If you are adult the hollow “da-DUM-da-DUM” monotony of that first line absolutely needs a pull and twist perhaps an inch before its end.

But here's a thing you've seen in children of your acquaintance. They can take peculiar comfort and delight in endlessly reciting the alphabet or endlessly counting numbers or endlessly repeating some simple lyric, or such as that, in that unbroken heartbeat rhythm, and the longer it goes on the better. Me thinking as a Darwinist, I guess this peculiarity arises in a child's instinctive deep commitment to personal survival. I guess the one-beat is so powerfully beautiful to us at that age because it opens our consciousness of the heartbeat in our chest, reassuring proof that we are alive and calm.

I felt sure that for the couplet to succeed it must have the one-beat as its pervading state of consciousness, its mathematic. So I wrote that requirement first on my mental list submitted to the magic mill and then was not surprised to hear the first line's “da-DUM-da-DUM” rhythm coming from my lips. But then the second line's surprising transformation of the beat seemed marvelously ingenious.

“I went OUT to WALK be-SIDE the SHORE // the wind came and said “FOR-EV-ER MORE”

That flip into a 4:1 beat, if we may call it that, looks very odd. But the human ear can hear more varieties of rhythm than poets ever use, many more. After all, our sense of hearing probably evolved to interpret birdsong, in a broad landscape with a multitude of birds all prone to bursts of noise. Their cries and occasional cacophonies would offer a treasure of information on what was happening out of our sight. So says a leading theory on the evolution of our hearing that I find vividly convincing.

I think the birdsong proposal very well explains our ability and eagerness to hear coherent signals in an immense variety of overlaying sounds. Finding a rhythm would be the way to pick a single bird or pack of birds out of the distance or the din so we might guess what they are saying to each other. Furthermore, it very well explains the compelling visual imaginings we can experience from hearing rhythms, imaginings that can compel us with the strength of instinct toward various actions or emotional desires to take action. In the setting of

our old ancestors' lives, believing a mental picture that arises in our ears from birdsong might often let our family escape a predator or eat instead of starving.

For one thing, I guess the couplet's second line symmetrically fulfills the rhythm of the first, not breaking but enhancing the first, perhaps turning it inside out in our mental sensation of the mathematic, making what the computations in the human ear decide to be a symmetrically completed bird call signal. Both lines have the same count of syllables, and the same counts of hard and soft, although reversed, but the complete rearranging of count and stress demands attention, offering perhaps a visual thought that something has definitely changed in our imagined situation.

And certainly there is something strong changing in our sensation of the mathematics – by which I mean our pervading sense of consciousness – when we hit the second line. I feel like it is our understanding of the geometry of space around us that suddenly strongly changes and I feel this compellingly coincides with the imagined mystical experience offered in that same mental instant by the couplet's storytelling words.

With the first line, in my mental eye I saw us walking step by step through some close space, like a forest path or a path between big rocks or through concealing head-high seaside grasses, aware of step by step. Then a syllable that should be stressed has slipped away. Suddenly there is a kind of mathematic cubing of the rhythm and immediately a mention of the seaside wind suddenly leads me to look and see the sky above and the panorama ahead of us have rushed away into infinity. Then inside this echoing space, in the vast hollow cawing of the seagulls, the penetrating wind comes telling me an awesome intimation that infinity is in me and in everything.

Nor was I the only one to gain a startling and interesting experience as the couplet's words rolled from my lips. I was speaking directly to my neighbor little girl with the kind of clear enunciation that instinctively denotes a poem and she had closed her eyes to better see whatever mental pictures might arise.

“I went OUT to WALK be-SIDE the SHORE // the wind came and said “FOR-EV-ER MORE”

While I watched, the good child's face showed gestures quite in time with the imaginary sensations I was feeling. First there were the small movements of her eyes behind her lids that seemed to fit the walking I imagined. Then there was a stress of indecision with the morphed rhythm. Then after the speaking stopped, during the instants while I felt my computations going, her face was stilled into a kind of interested waiting. Then – an instant after my own astonishment to see the imaginary sky and horizon have receded, and to feel infinity in the wind of seagull cries – I saw an impact of shock and then a smile of aesthetic pleasure on the little girl's face.

Later, at the festival's open air lunch, her mother and I had a nice chat. The lady revealed that she often reads poems to the children. It occurs to me, thinking as a Darwinist, that the lady's very excellent household custom recreates something in the ancient human way of life. I can easily picture our ancestors at their work or leisure, now and then, often for the children's pleasure, rolling out speech in complex artistic form. In any case, I'm sure that hearing poetry at home awoke and nurtured this child's natural ability to experience it so well.

I should mention how the seaside came into the couplet. It was the second thing on the list of required features that I submitted to the magic mill. Obviously I hoped we would work up to some punchy intimation of Infinity, of course, and I needed an intimation of Infinity that is commonly available to young children. My wife's passionate recollections of her childhood by the sea leaped into mind. There followed my own family's infrequent visits to the shore, and the fearful sense of alien danger I felt there, and the time much later as an adult when that fear was calmed. So this was obviously a good idea. I added "seaside visit" to the list and it emerged as the little poem's story track.

So now I should mention story, what it is. As we humans have a sense of rhythm, so we have a rich, complex and useful sense of story, which was running in my mind simultaneously with the rhythm. It seems certain that story has a strong evolutionary value because it is just as powerfully linked with its own modes of comprehension and emotion as are the senses of rhythm, touch, smell, vision and all the rest.

Perhaps story's best value might be resolving life's confusions. We hear there was a person; we hear the person did something; we hear something happened in response; and we become in some way positioned or even satisfied with these imagined facts. This story sense contains practical lists of characters – humans, plants, animals, animate forces – with their possible interactions together and with suggestions of how we should therefore feel or act.

But in this couplet's little story one of the characters is Infinity – or Spirit or God or Ghost or whatever you would name it – and in the moment of the story we feel this is a genuine character, one our story instinct recognizes, one who can even speak to us. What is that about? Why has evolution given us that?

I guess we humans have this story character "Infinity" (or Spirit or God or Ghost etc.) because story – a mode of comprehension and emotion where you pretend – is a good place for us to exercise our valuable psychic senses. Pretending is a big help when you want to mentally step from ordinary physics – where cosmic consciousness, telepathy, precognition and the rest are ridiculously impossible – into quantum physics where they are ordinary, useful and valuable abilities of the human mind.

In other words, I am guessing that "Infinity" (by whatever name) is on our instinctive list of story characters while our list of available interactions with the character includes

“intimations of infinity”. Also cosmic consciousness, telepathy, precognition and the rest are on that list of available interactions. My personal sensations do seem to fit this scheme.

But also personal experience has convinced me that once we get into our scenes of pretended mysticism we can then stop pretending. This seems to put me firmly in the camp of believers who believe that direct unnamed experience of the Infinite Divine is more realistic than all our holy stories. And I feel sure that one path into that unnamed experience, for me, is through loving children. And a way of loving children is by using stories.

There are other curious subjects that I have discovered here but will not explore. What are beauty and aesthetic pleasure from a Darwinist view? What is the creative “magic mill” that I experience? What is melody? What is that desperate “bardic” competition thing among performing artists? Maybe some other time and place.

But I will try to complete the story track of this essay with a final incident. I had lain a couple of books – my novel and my big compendium of pictures, poetry and stories – on the festival's free giveaway sharing table. After the nice outdoor lunch, when the good lady and her husband and their kids were packing up their shoulder bags, I noticed that my books were now among their gear.

[End]