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Deer in Their Own Coats

Daniel Coleman
McMaster University



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Deer in Their Own Coats



Photo: Lisa Szabo-Jones

The deer were going directly into a human community, upon their own volition. Why?

It is a question I cannot answer, but it is a manner of accommodation. It reminded me of my Indian people of the past. They too went into the white man's community, putting on his coat and tie, and attempting to accommodate to this strange society. The result was mixed. Some survived, most didn't.

Did the deer survive? Probably. I don't know. [They] were wearing their own coats....

One thing is certain. They can only survive as long as we do. We are displacing them from their home daily. We are displacing the future generations that our Great Law says we must protect. In protecting them, we protect ourselves. The great spiritual law of peace says that all life is equal and a manifestation of the Creator's will. Therefore we must respect each life as such, and recognize that we are journeyers who must depend on one another...

We must see with the clarity of those animals that survive among us, wearing their same coats, and we must reciprocate their interaction.

— Oren Lyons, “Power of the Good Mind”

This sighting of urban deer took place in Syracuse, New York, about one hundred and fifty kilometres east of where I live here in Hamilton, Ontario. The renowned Onondaga chief and university professor, Oren Lyons, was driving home late one night after a long day at the office where he worked at S.U.N.Y. Buffalo as Chair of American Studies. Just after he'd passed a large cemetery, he braked to watch two does and a yearling tiptoe across the road and vanish into the hedges and lawns of a suburb. Instead of sticking to the safety of the woods, the deer crossed the road right in front of his car and walked, unpressured and unbidden, into the city.

I too have been watching a family of urban deer in the fringe of woods below our street and above the university parking lots. I fiddle with the focus on the binoculars, so I can see the lights in this curious fawn's eyes, the shine on her moist nose, the steam coming out of her nostrils. She's close. About twenty-five metres away. She stares hard at me. Her ears stare too.

Then she nods her head, very in-your-face: down, then up.

Again: Down. Then up.

In between nods, she stamps one of her dainty looking hooves into the inch of snow. Huff! Deer commonly look shy, high-strung and nervous, so the aggression of her actions makes me jump. She glares hard at me throughout this sequence. As if we're in one of those eye-gunning contests, when two people try to stare one another down.

Down. Then up.

After several nods and stamps, she blasts air loudly through her nostrils. I am guessing that it means: “Hey you, Git!” Or, to her family behind her, “He's still here!” Something.

The sound is so sharp and unexpected, I jump again.

She bows again.

What does all this mean? Maybe I should reciprocate.

So I bow too. Down. Then up. Very big movements, very dramatic. Not a little tilt of the head. To match the long arc of her motion, I bow from the waist, like they do in Shakespeare. I try to match the formality and size of her movements, but without the aggression.

I don't stamp, but I do a little blow. Fuff!

I'm serious about this. I mean no disrespect.

But she seems to think, either that I'm mocking her or that she's made her point, because she gives another disdainful huff of her hoof in the snow, then turns and vaults over the fallen tree behind her.

The beauty of this movement gives the impression that deer take something like comportment classes in their youth. A perfect half circle in the air. Hooves lifted, formal and curled, at the ankle. The half circle of the vault exactly the same radius from its centre, as if someone had drawn it with a compass. The landing soft and dignified, with just the right amount of give in the legs that nothing jars or jiggles. The whole arcing movement has the grace of slow motion. As soon as it's over, you want to rewind and see it again.

This young one's sudden vault startles the clan, and they trot after her across the swampy ground and into the trees on the other side.

We've had some kind of interaction, but I don't know what it meant. I hope my bowing and snorting didn't mean something bad about her mother.

Despite Lyons' surprise that deer, boldly wearing their own coats, are entering city life, white-tailed deer across the continent are doing a lot better than surviving. They are really and truly flourishing.

Zoologists say there are more white-tails today in North America than there ever have been—ever, even compared to the pre-contact years before Europeans arrived on this continent. After contact, this deer species' population had declined by 1930 to 300,000. But with the steady transformation of forests into farmable acres, in addition to predator-free suburbs, they've now increased to about 30 million.

Deer like city life, almost as much as humans do.

So what are we to make of their growing presence in our midst? If we're going to take Lyons' advice, how are we to respect these fellow urbanites and "reciprocate their interaction"?

I've decided to try some reciprocating of my own, some real life interactions with the deer that live in this city. I can't really say if these interactions will help us respect each other, but I have been working on recognition as a basic starting point. To me, a deer has always been a deer. I haven't been able really to tell one from the next. Except if it has antlers, it's a male. If it doesn't, it's either a female or too young to show yet. But I've decided to see if I can get to

know the deer around here better than this. They're always around, so I've got the perfect opportunity to see if I can learn who's who.

There's a group of seven that have worn a path below our property, running from the low swampy ground that used to be Binkley Pond west of our place to the rills that run out of the slope above the university parking lots below us. I think of it as their water path. They need a string of spots where they can get water and stay mostly hidden from the traffic and bustle of the city. To watch deer any day of the week and pretty much any time of the day, all I have to do is grab my binoculars, coat, and hat, and walk down to the marshy spot that I've come to call the deer yard. It's easier to see them in fall and winter, when the leaves are down and the undergrowth doesn't block the view. You can see tracks more readily, too, if there's snow.

Almost every time I go down to the yard, there have been two young ones a foot shorter than the others in their group. They're exactly the same height and size as each other, and they stick close together, nuzzling with their tender black noses at the same blades of green and yellow grass poking up through the skim of snow. Every once in a while, they'll stop and groom each other, standing stern to bow and licking each other's coats. Like I say, except for the antlers and barrel chests of bucks, I haven't learned to tell which sex a deer is, especially when they're young like this. But I'll call one of them a he, and the one I just bowed to a she, to make it easier to tell which one I'm talking about. He's more red-copper coloured than her mouse-brown and gray. But these are differences of degree, and I wonder if they'll show this difference after they've gone through the molt in the spring. Compared to the adults and the single older yearling, these young ones' fur is thicker, more woolly and coarse. They have wiry hair even on their faces, the smoothest part of their bodies, whereas the adults' fur looks combed in comparison.

I want to call these two fawns, but they don't have spots anymore, and I don't know if they count as fawns or as yearlings without the spots. Whatever they're called, these young ones are bolder than the adults. Maybe they haven't seen bad things happen like the older ones have. One or the other of these little ones will usually step forward once they see me, whereas the others will usually back away. These are urban deer. So they don't bolt and run at the sight of a human. These city deer are too cool for bolting. They just amble on a few steps, nibble at a bush, a few more steps, some tall grass, a few more steps. Pretty soon they're out of sight.

I had heard or read somewhere before that the kind of hoof stamping the fawn performed during our bowing ritual is an alarm signal, but I assumed it was an auditory thing, perhaps reinforced by vibration in the ground that other deer can feel. I didn't know until I read up on deer communication that it also works by smell. It turns out white-tailed deer have what they call interdigital glands, located between the two halves of each hoof, and the sharp jab into the earth releases some yellow waxy stuff that has a strong odour. What I thought were dainty jabs of the hoof were actually stink bombs.

I don't know how effective hoof-jabbing would be in winter. Would the soft snow underfoot cushion the impact and not release the smelly wax? And, if it did release, would the smell be lost in the cold? I didn't smell anything, and even when I ran over to where she'd stood, I saw

no sign of wax. Maybe it was buried in the snow somewhere. To me, the hoof-stomping looked cute, like a child not getting her way.

Smell is huge in the world of deer. Not only do white-tails have scent glands between the toes of their hooves, they also have them on the outside of what looks like their ankle but is technically called the metatarsal joint. They've got another set on the insides of the knee, technically the tarsal or, in horse anatomy, the hock.

When I first started watching deer, I couldn't help but notice they all have round, black, leathery-looking patches on the inside of the hock. If you look at a deer head-on, you'll see that they have a slightly knock-kneed stance, especially in the long, slim, back legs. So I had wondered if the black leather patches were spots—calluses, you might say—where the fur gets worn away by constant rubbing when they walk.

Not at all. These tarsal, metatarsal, and interdigital glands are all parts of their communications system. All they have to do is walk, and their hoof glands leave wax signs of their passing on the ground. And whenever they drag an ankle through the leaves of a shrub or their knees rub each other, they're expressing themselves. They're communicating all the time.

Especially during breeding season, but I've seen it at other times of year too, bucks will create "rubs" or "scrapes." They'll arch their backs awkwardly and pee so that it runs over the black leather patches of their tarsal glands and down into muddy patches that they have scraped up with their hooves. With all that pee and musk, their ballsiness is pretty hard for other bucks and interested does to misread. The males will also scrape bark and twigs from small trees with their antlers, leaving scent from their heads on the tree trunks while they're polishing their boney spars. They'll then mix these tree bits into their urine-and-musk scented soup.

I don't have a great sense of smell. There have been times when I've been down in the deer grounds and the place reeked of what I think was deer-rub. But there is also leakage from household and street drains that can seep down below our neighbourhood, and I'd be hard-pressed to tell deer communication from the odour of fetid water, and then to tell both of those from the compost of rotting vegetation that's part of any swampy area.



And what would Oren Lyons think about the six-foot-high chain link fence we built around our backyard to keep out these over-interactive, always-communicating deer?

Before we installed the fence, we really couldn't keep plants growing in the garden. A sharp, horizontal line on our cedar hedge about six feet from the ground used to mark how high deer can reach. Above this line, a luxurious-looking, sappy, thick green tuft of leaves poked stiffly into the air. Below it, like one of those posters showing the human skeletal system in a doctor's waiting room, deer teeth had exposed the gray-brown tangle of ribs, gnarled and brittle. I couldn't imagine cedar as tasty, so I tried some. The resin was sharp as gasoline. My nose and

mouth instantly flooded. My eyes ran. But maybe winter hunger, and their knowledge of vitamins, makes cedar necessary when the snow is deep.

Maybe it was generations of watching deer that taught the Haudenosaunee people of this region to cure the scurvy that was killing Jacques Cartier's sailors on the St. Lawrence River in the 1530s with cedar tea.

The deer were on their way to killing the euonymous hedge on the east side of our yard. It was as if they would toss their own winter salad: a mouthful of fummy cedar, then a mild green euonymous leaf or two, followed by another hit of cedar. Every spring, tulips would unwrap swelling green buds, and, just when the first signs of colour began to streak their casings, I'd come out some morning to find stem after stem beheaded, tulip sap leaking from the cut.

We tried to share. To be good neighbours and live in harmony. We checked the web to find out how to keep the deer from eating our favourite plants. One idea was to pare off shavings of strong-smelling Irish Spring soap around our plants. When that didn't work, we tried moth balls, clustered like astringent partridge eggs at the roots. This just made our eyes water in the garden. We tried shaking powdered chili pepper onto the hosta leaves. The pepper made an ugly oxblood stain down the middle of each green and white leaf. And, the deer seemed to like the pepper.

One site suggested we put out pails of coyote pee. *Coyote pee?* You could order some through their website. I tried to imagine the look on the UPS guy's face when he got me to sign for the delivery.

After reading through our plant books and visiting the garden centre, we came home with narcissus bulbs and inedible-looking spiky holly bushes to replace the tulips and the hostas. Animals know narcissus are poison, so the next spring the daffodils and hyacinths did not get cropped. But the holly was soon as chewed as the hostas and the coral bells. Deer are like goats—they'll eat anything. Not only will they eat flowers, fruit, or acorns, white-tailed deer have been known to feed on nesting songbirds and field mice.

Good luck finding garden plants they don't like.

Now we have the fence, and we can grow things again. There was a readjustment period, when our white-tailed neighbours grudgingly gave up their quest for our cedar hedge. Early the first winter after we installed the fence, we were surprised to find a doe grazing contentedly on the euonymous hedge one morning. In a way, I was glad to see her. I had wanted to see if deer could get into the yard, and, if they could, whether they could get out again on their own. I didn't want the new fence to create a trap. So I put on my boots and ran out hollering into the yard. She took off down the slope and did that gorgeous half-moon vault right over the fence at the bottom, her perfect hooves just clipping the top rail.

But how did she get in? The inch of snow let me follow her tracks back to the eight-inch gap between our fence post and the corner of our neighbour's carport. You'd never dream that a four-foot tall, 120-pound adult animal could squeeze through the tiny gap.

These euonymous leaves must be delicious. I had tasted the cedar, so I thought I might as well taste one of these. At first bite, it had the texture and flavour of a plastic bag. After a few seconds, it released a slight, short-lasting bitterness. Not entirely unpleasant, but not as distinctive as arugula or dandelion, not as crunchy as iceberg or romaine. Maybe it's more appealing when you live outside all winter, and you can't run to a store full of hothouse greens.

That deer in the yard is a few years ago now, and we haven't had one since. Today, as I say, you can see a clear path following our fence, where they cross the valley below our row of houses, looking for water from the springs down there and easier pickings from our fenceless neighbours' yards. Maybe our chain link makes us good neighbours.

I don't have as many fantasies about hunting rifles as I used to.



I haven't been the only one keeping an eye on the deer in this city. In November 2009, the Hamilton Conservation Authority closed the Iroquoia Heights Conservation Area, up on the lip of the escarpment two kilometres from here, after a fellow taking photos came across the intestines of a deer that had been butchered right there in the city park. According to the paper, he also found a carbon arrow outfitted with razor-sharp blades.

A day or two later, park workers saw a Six Nations man carrying a crossbow in the same park. Upon inquiry, he said he was conducting "an environmental scan."

So began a string of articles in *The Hamilton Spectator* on the over-population of deer in the city, the treaty rights of Haudenosaunee people to hunt all over this region, and the idea of "deer management."

Around the time of the disemboweled deer at Iroquoia Heights, members of the Haudenosaunee Wildlife and Habitat Authority contacted the Hamilton Conservation Authority to say that there were too many deer for the 120-hectare park.

The Canadian Ministry of Natural Resources did an aerial survey of Iroquoia Heights and agreed with the Six Nations Wildlife and Habitat Authority. They counted 102 deer in an area that should feed a dozen or less. They also found similar over-populations of white-tails throughout Hamilton's park system. Iroquoia Heights is under particular pressure because it's boxed in by roads and neighbourhoods. The six lanes of Highway 403 slice up the side of the escarpment in a half circle that hems in the north and west sides of the park. At the top, hundreds of thousands of roaring cars and trucks braid into that cloverleaf where the 403 connects to the four lanes of the Lincoln Alexander Parkway, which cuts off access on the south side. The only way deer can get into or out of the park is through the suburb at the end of Mohawk Road.

Note all the Haudenosaunee names: Niagara Escarpment, Iroquoia Heights, Mohawk Road. They show how this whole area is saturated with Six Nations presence, whether we're conscious of it or not. Often, it's camouflaged, power-dressed in the suit and tie of politics and bureaucracy: a Six Nations Wildlife and Habitat Authority to match the Hamilton Conservation Authority. But sometimes it emerges from the government-to-government negotiations of the Indian Affairs regime and into everyday life when creatures like the deer insist on wearing their own coats.

Without predators, or ready entry or exit, the white-tails of Iroquoia Heights have reproduced phenomenally. The park is like a test tube, a reproduction laboratory.

With the Ministry's confirmation that there were too many deer in the parks, the Hamilton Conservation Authority tried to corral the situation back into the office when they held closed-door talks with Six Nations hunters about organizing a cull. Suddenly one day, hiking trails in a section of the Dundas Valley, west of Iroquoia Heights, sprouted signs right here in this city that announced a deer hunt and that people should proceed with caution.

Proceed? With caution?

The Hamilton Spectator had a field day. How would the park managers guard against accidents? Would the Iroquoian hunters avoid dogs or little kids? One woman said she was going to buy one of those orange safety vests construction workers wear for her Great Dane. Sometimes, it's dangerous to wear your own, unmarked coat.

For a while, the debate focused on the Treaty of Albany of 1701, commonly called the Nanfan Treaty after John Nanfan, who was British governor of New York when the treaty was signed. In this agreement, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy recalled their victories over the Hurons between the 1640s and the 1660s in what is now Ontario north of the Great Lakes. They then signed over to the British exclusive trading rights throughout a huge tract of land north of the Ohio River from what's now upstate New York all the way to Chicago. This swath of land covered much of southern Ontario. In exchange, they demanded perpetual hunting and fishing rights throughout the whole region. Never mind that this was not exactly where the Hurons had lived, so it wasn't really Confederacy territory to sign away. Never mind that, by this time, the Nishinaabek had pushed them back out of much of the land known today as Ontario. Some have suggested that the Haudenosaunee were playing two sides of the treaty game, signing the Treaty of Montreal to make peace with the French and their Algonquian allies during the same summer that they signed the Nanfan Treaty with the British.

Whatever the politics of the day, Ontario's attorney general and the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs ruled, in response to the Hamilton Conservation Authority's inquiry in June 2011, that the Nanfan treaty holds. It still applies in the twenty-first century. By this time, the Conservation Authority had quickly put together what they called the Deer Management Advisory Committee, and a member of this group told the newspaper that "The hunting rights are not ... HCA's to give or take away. They are rights the Haudenosaunee already possess. No one is allowed to deny them these rights."

Canadians tend to know in a fuzzy way that treaties were signed somewhere back in history and that they have something to do with why Native people live on reserves and settlers get to have all the rest of the land, but most people seem to think the treaties somehow went out of fashion and lost their legal clout. So it was more than a shock for many Hamiltonians to learn that a treaty signed in 1701 is still binding and that it continues to give the descendants of its Longhouse signatories the right to hunt in our city.

Treaty or not, people were affronted at the idea of hunting going on in city parks. In May of 2010, the racial underbelly of that outrage rose to the surface. *The Spectator* reported that a Conservation Authority ecologist had been doing a deer survey in Iroquoia Heights when she spotted a deer bone. Her discovery made her check the area more closely, and what she found was an animal pit trap, complete with upright sticks and a plywood cover, hidden by a camouflage net and a dusting of leaves. Residents in the neighbourhood said they'd seen another one in the park. These dangerous traps were immediately linked to "suspected native hunting." The ecologist said, "You could probably break something [if you fell in] ... You could get bruised, broken, or you could get impaled by a stick." The same article quoted the director of the Animal Alliance of Canada saying people who live near the park sent her photos of a camouflaged pit and a shotgun shell. They were about six metres apart in the conservation area.

The implication was that Native hunters have no concern for Hamiltonians' safety. The recognition of Indigenous treaties makes everyday citizens susceptible to physical harm as First Nations use out-dated treaties to sabotage our civil order.

The very next day, however, *The Spectator* carried the photo of a ten-year-old boy from the neighbourhood right beside Iroquoia Heights. He reported that he and a couple of friends had built a fort in the conservation area by fitting poles into a sinkhole and covering it with a plywood roof. He'd saved up his allowance until he had the fifty dollars he needed to buy a camouflage net to keep the fort hidden. He and his friends squirreled away cool boy stuff—like binoculars and a bullet casing—in their dugout.

"We'd rather be outside than playing Xbox," he said.



The first time I walked down to the deer yard, I was disappointed to see they'd known I was coming long before I saw them. As I say, deer have a keen nose. So I checked the breeze and saw it was coming from the southwest, and I snuck up to the yard from the east. I felt pretty smart about that. I later learned that deer are dichromatic, meaning that they see a two-colour spectrum, rather than the three-colour spectrum that humans see, so my self-congratulation on wearing beige and brown clothing to match the winter woods was unfounded. This must be why hunters don't mind wearing day-glow orange hats or what look like safety vests. What deer do see, better than humans do, are patterns and changes in texture. Two-colour vision works better in shady woods than three-colour, because the forest canopy dulls down colour anyway, stealing the vibrancy from reds, lime-greens, and other bright colours, and throwing them into

shadow. Deer pay attention to changes in pattern, where our tri-colour vision makes us notice varieties of colour.

Deer also have excellent ears. These receptors swivel like small radar dishes that are white-centred and outlined in black fur, and they can pivot independently from each other. White-tailed deer can hear about five or six times better than humans can. I tried not to snap twigs on the frozen, snowless ground, but I needn't have bothered about the twigs. They could hear everything about my approach, from my jacket sleeves rustling against the sides of my body to my breathing. I've since figured out that new soft snow, plus a whistling wind or some other distraction, like traffic noise, help to mask my lumbering through the woods. But I hadn't thought about these things then.

So when I poked my head over the ridge above the low spongy ground on my first visit to the deer yard, the two bucks, two does, and three younger ones already had their heads up and were staring alertly at me. The two bucks had their antlers, and I'd read enough to know that their presence with the does meant that they were still in rutting season. Once they get to be one-and-a-half or two years old, males separate off from the does and fawns except for mating season. They may hang out with each other in bachelor groups in the spring and early summer, but otherwise bucks are pretty much loners.

These two still had their antlers. Deer are distinguished from antelope by having antlers made of bone, which they shed every winter and re-grow through the spring and summer. By contrast, antelope have fibre horns that they never shed. The new antlers prepare white-tail bucks for sparring over females in the fall rut. One of the two bucks in the deer yard was clearly older, with a big barrel chest, a large apron of white fur under his chin, and a six-point rack of antlers about two feet across and eighteen inches high. The smaller one had six-points too, but his antlers were about eighteen inches across and about a foot tall. His chest and thighs were slimmer, less bullish. Bucks drop their antlers after the fall rut, but these two still had theirs in January, and as I watched their yard over the next months, I saw the younger one still had his antlers in early March.

Deer hold an honoured place in the Haudenosaunee's creation stories. Following the story about the woman Atsi'tsiaká:ion falling from the Sky World and landing on the turtle A'nó:wara's hard shell comes the story of how Sky Woman's daughter died giving birth to twins. The first twin had been born normally, but the second was too impatient to wait his turn, so he burst out of his mother's armpit, killing her in the process. Ever since, the two sons have been in conflict. The peaceable twin created humans and all the upright, beautiful creatures by breathing into their earthen bodies, while the restless twin, trying to outdo his brother's creations, made incomplete, crawling, and monstrous beings. Their rivalry escalated from gambling games to stick-ball competitions and, eventually, into outright fighting. All the earth's creatures watched the battle rage day after day. Generous-hearted brother knew that there were only two things that his jealous brother feared: flint stone and deer antlers. Finally, after many days of struggle, Ohskenón:ton, the stag, lowered his head to the ground and gave his

antlers to the first brother, who used them to push his unhappy brother over the edge and into the underworld.

Deer are therefore revered in Haudenosaunee tradition for being generous supporters and protectors of the good mind and the creative spark of life. They gave their antlers to the creator of good things to help him overcome selfishness and resolve conflict, and they continue to give their coats and bodies to keep humans clothed and fed. To this day, Haudenosaunee leaders wear deer antlers in their head-dresses to remind everybody how peaceable relations depend on the good mind.

This part of the story has made me keep an eye out for antlers whenever I've gone to visit the deer yard. Bucks drop them every year, so it couldn't be too hard to find some. It would signify an interaction. I've looked and looked. So far, no luck. The floor of the yard is littered with deadfalls from the maples and walnuts whose gray-white branches are exactly the colour of old bone, so it's a little like looking for a needle in a haystack.



Over the next two years, the Deer Management Advisory Committee searched for the needle of peace in our city's bickering haystack. They consulted with the Six Nations Confederacy, the Animal Alliance of Canada, the Ministry of Natural Resources, the provincial Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, city aldermen, and folks who live in the neighbourhood. Pretty much everyone agreed there were too many deer in the city, but they had very different views about what to do about it. Residents in the neighbourhood said the deer were crowding into their yards, eating plants, pooping in their yards and, according to one person, "chasing terrified residents from their own decks." I can imagine how a full-grown buck with a large rack of antlers might scare some people, but most deer are not exactly fearsome.

Some people warned that an over-population of deer creates environmental imbalance. They pointed to cedar trees stripped of their bark and the way numbers of white trilliums have dropped off in the conservation lands around Hamilton. In the year 2006 alone, the Ministry of Natural Resources counted 200 deer-related car crashes in the Hamilton area, and they guessed that seventy-five per cent of these kinds of crashes never get reported. Others who attended the Deer Management Advisory Committee meetings said they'd seen deer blinds and little pieces of fluorescent tape to gauge shooting distance in the valley. They'd also found headless deer carcasses. All of these, signs that poachers were active in the city.

But what to do? Representatives of the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters suggested a radical culling. As you can imagine, the Animal Alliance of Canada strongly objected. A kill is short-sighted, because populations wiped out quickly rebound quickly. Their solution, though, sounded weak: start a public education campaign to teach people not to provide food or habitat that encourage deer. It's not about managing deer, their director said, it's about managing human behaviour. Which is true, according to the Conservation Authority and the Royal Botanical Gardens, who look after most of the conservation lands around Hamilton. They said the deer problem was made by humans because the whole situation is a result of urban

development—mostly roads, but other structures too—that have pressed the deer into smaller and smaller places.

City planners in their suits and ties have mapped out neighbourhoods, highways, and shopping centres without thinking about deer, wearing their own coats, living in our midst. They thought that saving a few acres for parks would do the job. But instead of keeping these deer in tiny bits of wild where we could visit them on Sunday afternoons, the roads and subdivisions we built have packed them into a reproductive pressure cooker.



Down in the deer yard, it's turned out that, alongside antlers, injuries are the easiest way for me to distinguish one family member from another. One Sunday afternoon, I watched one of the adult females for an hour and was able to get close enough to take some photographs—mostly because she must have either broken or dislocated her right foreleg some time back. It joined her shoulder with an ugly crook—the kind you see when someone throws out their shoulder and you get that queasy feeling in your stomach looking at the slump by their neck where their shoulder should be. And the length of her tibia between her patella and her tarsal joint—if we were talking about a human leg, we would say between hip and knee—looked much shorter than on her healthy leg. I could see she didn't like to put weight on that leg. Mostly, she let it dangle, rarely touching the ground, as she grazed from grass to alder bark. Each time she moved, I followed at a distance. She'd hump her back and heave her good hoof forward, her head jerking up at the end of each hop. It was January in a strangely warm winter, but there were still cold months ahead, and I wondered if she would make it. When the snow got deep, could she dig enough away to get something to eat? There were no ribs showing, so that seemed like a good thing. And she looked plump enough, to my inexperienced eye.

I checked in on her regularly over the rest of the winter. Thanks to the warm temperatures and little snowfall, she kept looking healthy, except for the limp. I startled her among her family once or twice when I came down to the yard, and, when she ran, she seemed smoother and more sure-footed than when she walked. Somehow it's easier to perform that series of graceful, half-moon deer vaults on three legs than it is to walk. If she could run and vault, then I guessed she had a chance against predators. If there are any living in the valley anymore. I've seen single coyotes a few times in the valley, and a red fox or two. But I've never heard of foxes going after a deer, and coyotes are opportunists. They might try to take down an adult deer if they're in a pack, but on their own they are more likely to scare up something small, like a rabbit or a field mouse. But who knows? There have been articles in *The Spectator* about the rising number of coyotes in the city's park system. So maybe there are enough to form a pack. I've never seen tracks of more than one coyote, but then again I don't know how to tell the difference between coyote and dog tracks. So I have no idea if the single sets I've seen are one or the other.

I wondered about predators when I got my first close look through binoculars at one of the twin fawns in the limping doe's family clan.

The first time I glimpsed him in the group, I didn't have the field glasses, and my bare eyes told me one of the fawns had strange racing stripes, bright white, following the curve of his back haunches on both sides of his body. They looked like a deer version of those dramatic flames you see painted on the fenders of a muscle car. But the next time I went down to the yard, I had a good look through the glasses and realized they weren't stripes, but scars.

Huge scars, five inches across, almost identical on both sides of his body, right in front of the big round leg muscles on his back end. The bottom and back edges of these leathery, whitish gray patches were still livid, raw meat, the right side more so than the left. The little one's thick winter fur looked like it had been shaved back from the wounds, and I could see that what I had thought were racing stripes were the white edge lines where the shaggy winter coat had been sheared away.

What could cause such stomach-churning scars? And why were they symmetrically placed on both sides?



Photo: Daniel Coleman

Everywhere else, this fawn's fur looked thick and rich, so I didn't think he had mange, which wouldn't appear in exactly the same place on each side. Did some predator grab him from behind, claws tearing at both sides of his body, like lions do wildebeests in *National*

Geographic? But what animal would do that here in our ravine? A dog or coyote when this young deer was tiny? The scars didn't look like the raking motions of claws, though, so I didn't put much stock in this possibility. Or, how about this: Could the curious little guy have got stuck in a spot too narrow to pass through, and jerked himself free, tearing both sides of his body at the hips? I think back to that full-grown doe who squeezed through the eight-inch gap between our fence and our neighbour's carport.

What violent or accidental story do these scars tell?

I started keeping an eye out, not just for Limping Doe, but for the one with the patches too, all through the winter months. I worried that infection, plus the lack of a winter coat at his back end, would make him prone to sickness and cold. But each time I saw him over the next three months, I saw that more and more fur was covering those bald spots. During the spring molt in April, I had a moment when I wasn't sure if the young one with the mussed up spots near its haunches was Scars or his sister. This time of the year, all the deer have cowlicks of fur that stick up from their bodies like old roof shingles curling in the sun as they shed their winter hair, so it was hard to tell what was scar and what was molt.

By the next fall, I couldn't tell which was him and which his sister. But by then, they were starting to get big enough that I was also having difficulty distinguishing them from the does. And I also realized that he with the scars was a she. She showed no signs of antler buds. I never did unearth a cause for her wounds, and she eventually healed so successfully, I lost the ability to distinguish her from the others in her clan.



During the deer debates in the paper, Tuscarora artist and historian Rick Hill sent in an article on "The Role of Deer in Haudenosaunee Culture." He pointed out that "the deer were never meant to be in an urban reservation that you call a park. They are meant to have this range. Our job is to help maintain this natural intended balance." Sounding a lot like Oren Lyons, Hill goes on to say that for Six Nations people, hunting deer isn't recreation or sport. It's ceremonial. He says venison is spirit food, part of the yearly cycle. For centuries, men have brought it home from the woods and exchanged it for cornbread grown and made by women. The meat and hide play a big part in the Midwinter Ceremonies that involve rituals of thanksgiving for creation's generosity. "When we gather in our community," Hill says, "we always give thanks to the deer and animals that provide this for us as well as the foods. You could say it's right at the heart of the culture."

The story of the twin brothers connects deer to the good mind and the idea of protecting creation's goodness. I don't know if the Deer Management Advisory Committee were convinced by the idea of the good mind, or if they were more strategic and saw in it a window to let fresh air into a fetid debate, but they eventually adopted what we might call the Haudenosaunee solution. In December of the past four years, signs and yellow caution tape have been posted at trailheads and announcements have appeared in the paper stating that a large section of Hamilton's park system has been closed Mondays to Thursdays, leaving

weekends open, for a couple of weeks while Six Nations bow hunters cull the deer in our city. The parties have agreed on an annual quota, so it's not a radical cull, but a predictable, yearly hunt. The timing follows the usual deer hunting season, around the period of the fall rut, and it comes long enough before the Midwinter Ceremonies, so the men have time to do the butchering and freezing before they exchange venison for the women's cornbread.

The deer have pretty much forced the issue, with the result that we humans are recalibrating our relationships, not just with other human beings, but also with the lands and creatures that make up our neighbourhoods. We still think in roundabout, peek-a-boo language, like "deer management." But we've been given a poke, reminded for the moment at least, of a long-ignored presence amongst us. We're having to readjust our assumptions, develop new ways of thinking, maybe open ourselves to a good mind, as a result. Who knows? Maybe we'll become better neighbours, maybe get better at living with ourselves, because the deer wearing their own coats pushed into our notice.



I wonder if bucks' heads get itchy when they are losing their antlers. I can imagine it might get irritating when the new antler starts to push at the roots of the old one, like adult teeth pushing out baby ones.

Whatever it feels like for them, antlers have had me scratching my own head. As I say, I'd love to find a set. I saw a picture of an antler lying in a bed of dry leaves that someone sent in to the newspaper during the Iroquoia Heights kerfuffle. It made me think I'd love to come across a set myself. Having a set would remind me to side with my good mind and to see through the temptations of my restless, ugly one.

So isn't it more than a little significant that after months of looking, I finally found an antler not just on any day, but on Easter Sunday? I'd been reminded how religiously and culturally packed Easter weekend is by attending a Passover Seder meal at a friend's house. The Seder is a long, ceremonial meal during which you eat bitter herbs to remind you of the bitterness of slavery, you dip them in saltwater to remind you of the tears, and eat matzo bread to remind you that the escaping slaves didn't have time to let bread rise when they hurried out of their homes. This super-significant weekend layers the Jewish story of liberation from slavery with the Christian story of Jesus rising up out of the earth and asserting new life. Passover is set in the Hebrew month of Nissan, at the end of winter and the beginning of a new growing season. So both the Christian and Jewish ceremonies are layered over older spring-fertility rites, which, like the Midwinter Ceremonies, celebrate nature's yearly cycle of death and rebirth.

On this particular Easter Sunday, I wake before dawn, make a thermos of coffee, zip up my winter coat, grab my hat and gloves, and step out into the frosty April morning. Thinking of all the layers of meaning attached to this particular morning, I burn some sweet grass, watch the smoke rise into the gray morning air, and say the lines of a Nishnaabe prayer translated by Basil Johnston:

By you, Father
Through the sun
You work your powers
To dispel the night
Bring day anew
A new life, a new time.

To you, Father
Through the sun
We give thanks
For your light
For your warmth
That gives light to all.

I then tramp over to the Marks Binkley cemetery to pay my respects to the people in the ground. Also, the cemetery has a high, east-facing slope. From there, I'll watch the sun lift through the trees. I'll stand among my neighbourhood's dead and watch the new sun rise.

Waves of cloud lick at the horizon: pink, peach, then gold. Movement in the gray leaf-litter on the forest floor down in the ravine below catches my eye. I watch while four shadowy figures emerge from the gloom. One with a distinct limp. Limping Doe, the one with the scars, her sister, and their family.

I slide the glasses from my coat pocket, silent as I can. But my tiny movements are still big enough to perk their ears. The full beam of four pairs of deer radar glow up the gully at me. They hesitate on the path that leads up the slope thirty metres from where I'm standing. They mill about, uncertain of whether or not to proceed. Always the curious one, Scars steps from the group and, one hoof at a time, begins a careful, gradual climb—stop and scent, step and pause—up the slope towards me. All the while, she keeps me in her steady gaze. Her nostrils steam the air.

As she comes, I get a good look at her wounds. They are definitely healing. The patch on her left side is now completely covered in fur. A faint outline is all that's left of the racing stripes of white underfur near her haunch. You'd only know to look for it if you knew what had once been

there. The bald leathery patch on her right side has shrunk from seven to three inches across. There are no signs of the raw red I saw six weeks ago.

Limping Doe's condition, however, is the same, her walk halting as ever. Finally, she overcomes her nervousness about me being here and takes a couple of those graceful round vaults up the slope and onto the lawn by the entrance to the cemetery. Her gait remains smoother when she bounds than when she walks.

After their clan passes, I follow them to the deer yard farther down the valley to see who else might be there this morning. I've wondered how the doe and bachelor groups interact when they meet up, especially now that mating season's over.

When they realize that I'm following thirty metres back, the family waves their white flags at me and trots, ears perked, down into the marshy yard that used to be Binkley Pond. Expecting to see them spread out and settled, tugging with their teeth at the tufts of new green just starting to emerge from the mud and water, I'm surprised, when I peer over the lip of the bowl, to see a buck with two rust-coloured, furry bumps where his antlers used to be, chewing his most recent mouthful and gazing at me steadily. To his left I see another deer, and when I adjust the focus on the binoculars, I see he, too, has antler bumps, this time black, leather-looking, and swollen. Even farther left, I catch more movement, and pan the binoculars to find another buck, also in bud. I watch these three from the rim of the yard for fifteen minutes, swiveling the glasses from one to the next. Then, a flick of an ear close to the ground alerts me to a fourth, who's lying down and chewing his cud behind a tangle of wild grape—this one, like the first, with those reddish, furry buds. A bachelor group. I saw a solitary buck ten days ago, but haven't seen bucks together for at least three months, maybe four.

A flash of movement fifty metres to the left of these guys turns out to be Limping Doe and her group feeding on the marsh grass farther along the yard. They must have come down the trail I'm standing on and skirted around the four bachelors. As I turn my eyes back across the yard from the doe group to the bachelors, I glimpse an odd formation low down on the trunk of a skinny black walnut. All the lower limbs have broken off along the lower section of the tree, leaving this strangely shaped branch by itself. There's no reason why such an old, dried branch would not have snapped off too. But more than this, it's too big for the six-inch diameter of the trunk. And why would it be bare, polished clean of bark, when the tree trunk has its rough skin still intact?

Then it dawns on me.

I excitedly raise my binoculars and twiddle the focus. Sure enough! It's not a branch. Points embedded in the bark, three feet up from the ground, hangs an antler.

An offering. A blessing.

I've been telling myself not to hope to find antlers. It's too cheesy, too wanna-be-native, too symbolic. But I've hoped nonetheless. If it by thy will. This is the kind of thing you don't demand. It comes or it doesn't. I knew that the chances of it coming are higher if you show up.

I guess I've been showing up.

Not hidden in a tangle of grape vines. Not lost among the boneyard of dead branches scattered all over the deer yard floor. The antler is actually hanging from a tree, just as Creator Brother hung deer antlers high to mark the area for the good mind and off-limits for the restless one.

It's easy to get misty eyed when you find a deer's crown hanging on a tree on Easter Sunday morning. Hard not to think of Passover lambs sacrificed to save innocent children from the Angel of Death, hard not to think of the crown of thorns, of antlers given to help the Creator win the battle against the jealous mind.

What is this antler doing here? Is this the result of a scrape, as the buck added tree bark to his musk-and-urine rub? Does the itch of the growing antler make bucks rub their antlers against trees to knock them off?



Photo: Wendy Coleman

Later, I learn that black walnut is rich in a compound called juglone, which is so toxic that many plants can't grow in its vicinity. But the deer know it's also a good blood clotting agent, and they rub their antlers on walnut trees, hoping to scar the tree and release the juglone. And when the irritating antler finally comes off, they've got the agent they need right there for the bleeding pedicle that remains where the old rack had been attached. Deer knowledge based on empirical deer science.

Whatever the reason, Ohskenón:ton hung his antler up on a tree in a place where I could see it easily. I've walked through this part of the yard time and again for weeks, aware that the bucks would have dropped their antlers over the past months. I've scanned the ground, poked among the boney dead branches, surveyed the compost of the marsh where the skunk-cabbages are about to unroll wide umbrella leaves, peered deep into the tangles of grape and wild rose. Never seen a thing.

I can't get it out of my mind that it's on Easter morning, of all mornings, that one of these bucks in the bachelor group behind me hangs an antler high enough for me to see. It's as if he were saying, "I know this is a big day in your religion."

I feel like falling on my knees.

Instead, I teeter across a fallen log over a marshy spot steaming with deer rub. I step down from the log and cross the new grass and old leaves to the walnut to have a look at the hanging antler. It has three points now, used to have four. The one closest to the skull must have broken off early in its growth. You can tell because the jagged edges where it broke have been smoothed and stained with time. The next tine up, the longest, is jammed into a gash in the tree bark about five inches long. The middle tine is impaled in the bark with no gash line above or below it. The last tine, farthest from the head, sticks out into mid air, pointing back the way I had come. So I'm thinking the first tine must have got dragged down the tree trunk and when the middle tine hit the bark, the base of the antler snapped off.

Free deer. Free gift.

I lift the antler away from the marks on the tree. It comes away easily. Too easily to have stayed here very long. A good wind or rain storm would have knocked it down. The marks in the tree bark don't look especially fresh either. So there wouldn't be fresh wood inside to expose anyway. Has the antler been here for days? Or did one of these bachelors hang it up here this exact morning? Hard to tell.

I turn towards the four bucks, who are still grazing the fresh leaves uncurling on the high bush cranberries.

I bow from the waist, antler in hand.

I watch them for a minute.

I bow from the waist again: Thank you.

So far the bucks have kept me in sight, but they haven't given me much notice, as they continue to crop new grass. Now, one steps towards me, ears perked high, black eyes alert, nose quivering.

He bows too. Down. Then up.

Stamps his hoof. Thump. It's louder than the yearling's stamp in the winter. Louder now that the snow is gone.

He bows again. Down. Then up.

His eyes, wide open, deep and black, gaze into mine.

Then, he startles us all with a sharp huff of air, blown through his nostrils. The others trot back a few paces.

Across the yard, the one with the scars and the doe group lift their heads and look at us across the yard.

So I turn to them and bow again. Down. Then up.

DANIEL COLEMAN writes creative non-fiction, teaches Canadian literature at McMaster University, and is a late-registrant in Creation's unlimited school of non-alphabetical arts. He grew up in Ethiopia with missionary parents and moved to Canada in his late teens. He has published books on masculinity in Canadian immigrant literature, the spirituality of reading, the colonial construction of Canadian white identity (winner of the Klibansky Prize for Best Canadian Book in the Humanities), plus a memoir titled *Scent of Eucalyptus*.

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