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## Wahkohtowin: Keeping Things Whole

Lorri Neilsen Glenn

*Professor Emerita, Mount Saint Vincent University*

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LORRI NEILSEN GLENN

*Wahkohtowin: Keeping Things  
Whole*

*We all have reasons  
for moving.  
I move  
to keep things whole.*

– Mark Strand, “Keeping Things Whole”

Two mice sit at a bar with their drinks, and from across the way a woman in a work smock waves to one of them. The mouse turns to their friend, saying “It’s just someone I know from work.”

The cartoon by Navied Mahdavian in *The New Yorker* is amusing, but poignant. We sort the non-human creatures around our living spaces: they are either pets such as dogs, cats, aquarium fish, and budgies, or they are vermin such as mice, rats, ticks, cockroaches, and raccoons. In between we tend to tolerate moths, ants, silverfish, and more, depending on our personal preferences or the damage or disruption we think they will cause.

Last year, two mice began to take nightly walks around the main floor of our house. One evening a small loaf-shaped brown mouse appeared, nosed its way around the perimeter of the kitchen, down the hallway, then into the living room, and back around to the kitchen again, picking up whatever it could find along the route. I assume it was looking for food but perhaps the creature was a flâneur or flâneuse, taking its evening constitutional. Our dog, who normally erupts in fire-alarm-level barking at the sound of a car door, was resting on her cushion. She blinked with disinterest as the mouse walked by, and fell asleep.

Once, when I stayed in a hermitage in Saskatchewan, a nest of mice ran time trials across my body in the night, so many I stuffed my hair into a hat, hid under the covers, and tried to ignore the sensation of prickly feet scampering over my body long enough to catch an hour or two of sleep. I don’t jump on chairs or flee the room when I see mice, but I find them unsettling. They likely find humans unsettling, too.

Notice I am using the pronoun 'it' to refer to a mouse, and yet I refer to our dog as 'she.' True, I don't know the sex of the mouse, but if I did go to the effort to find out, I would still write 'it,' and that tells me something.

My husband and I bought standard wood snap traps and set them up around the main floor using peanut butter, cheese, seeds, and bits of twine as bait. Every night, Little Brown Mouse toured the house, breezing by the traps. After a month or so, a second mouse appeared: a small grey one. Assuming population growth, we bought large black spring-jawed traps meant for rats. The bait dried up. Do these city mice want better charcuterie, we wondered, or do they have enough food supply from elsewhere? Do they already know what a trap is? Should we borrow a cat?

By this time, I was so used to their evening visits, I felt a complicated kinship. They were, after all, only doing what we're all doing: finding shelter, moving about, trying to survive.

One night, I realized neither mouse had shown up. They didn't appear the next night, or the next. I realized I missed their routine, their amusing insouciance around traps, their sniffer-nose-to-ground exploration of the living area. They can spread diseases, I know, but these visitors caused no harm that we're aware of—no frayed wires, no gnawed objects or piles of lint, nothing. We didn't even consider hiring an exterminator, knowing their approaches wouldn't differ much from ours. We didn't want the mice dead; we just wanted them gone.

And now they were. And I missed them.

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Driving back from the country one evening, I felt something moving on my arm. It was tiny and green—an aphid, a thrip? I couldn't tell. I shook my arm and the bug landed on a louver of the air vent and stayed motionless there until I pulled into our driveway. I often wonder how far a fly or a mosquito trapped in a vehicle can travel and what happens when they survive long enough to enter a new landscape. I reckoned my little green companion didn't deserve an early death in a hot car and so I nudged a gas station receipt under it and then shook it out into the grass. At least there's food for you, I thought, feeling a shot of self-righteousness about not smacking another living thing. Yet, this same benevolent giant will crush a tick (Lyme disease!) or bolt out of bed at night to chase after a cluster fly or a mosquito until the swatter finds its target (let me sleep!). I admit to the Bambi effect: the little green bug was cuter.

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For years I attended writing retreats at an abbey in Saskatchewan. One of my favourite walks was along the road to the cemetery. Having once known a couple of the Benedictine brothers buried there, I found the walk past the rows of large elms to their graves both peaceful and sobering. It was often entertaining as well. Chickadees and nuthatches, even in minus 30-degree weather, were always on the move. They swooped down from the branches to nab peanut morsels from my open palm. Trained by the monks decades ago, generations of these

birds have since been providing residents and visitors with moments of delight. They help to keep any romantic notions I have about the so-called natural world intact. Archeologists say that humans may have been domesticating animals as early as 8000 BCE. We teach them to move in ways they wouldn't have otherwise, and in turn, they provide us with food, protection, transportation, clothing and entertainment.

Some birds, however, can be a problem. At the abbey, I'd see magpies strutting the roads and fields, their flashes of white dotting the landscape. Magpies can be bullies, according to farmers, pests that steal food from other creatures and kill smaller birds. But magpies, like all corvids, are also intelligent, can mate for life, and can recognize themselves in the mirror. Most corvids, trickster figures in story and myth, are considered messengers. Métis filmmaker Marie Clements writes of her mother's last days when a priest visited her hospital bed daily, wanting to give her last rites. Clements's mother didn't want last rites. "They are like crows," she said, "They always try and get you when you're down." It's the clergy's flapping black wings, writes Clements. "Beaks and birds' eyes that see everything." Clements's film, *Bones of Crows*, is a response to the systematic extermination of Indigenous children in Canada's residential school system. The chilling image of clergy as corvidae is a powerful trope.

One evening at the abbey, as writers on the retreat gathered in the lounge, one of the fathers announced with pride—should I have written *crowed about?*—the day's bird corpse count. Apparently, he often walked the grounds with a gun, shooting magpies and tallying his kill. To this man of the cloth, magpies are pests, known to endanger the chickadees and nuthatches, and to raid the garbage bins outside the institution.

Once we label another living thing a pest, it's easier to kill it. Dandelions. Loosestrife. Rat, cockroach, mouse.

I'm not a farmer, frustrated with living things invading my land. I understand magpies are omnivorous and can destroy crops. And I don't have an easy solution. I do wonder, however, what might happen if we stopped considering nonhuman creatures pests? At the risk of sounding naïve, what if we thought of all living things around us as kin?

When we reduce others to the status of pest, we make of them an Other. It's not a huge leap then to think of anything or anyone moving on what we consider our territory as a pest, unwanted and annoying. A threat. A menace. An Other. It's not a huge leap to want to reach for a fly swatter. Or to reach for a gun, and shoot.

Young men in a car, for example, from a nearby reserve.

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All creatures move in balance by dancing with the laws of gravity. Ducks have a lower centre of gravity than humans and thus a good base of support, as do birds, mice, and the tiny green traveler on my arm. When we walk, as poet Mark Strand reminds us, we keep things whole. The earth itself rotates at a speed of approximately 1670 km per hour. Everything is always moving.

In the last couple of years, my vestibular system has taken a hit and I often lose my balance. For a time, I walked like I was drunk, unsure of my centre of gravity, weaving and lurching to correct my gait. I began to use a cane. When I stood up, I'd have to grab someone or something—an arm, a railing, a table—before I could take a step. I feared standing in the shower. I regularly encounter people who use a wheelchair, a walker, or a scooter, people who can't climb stairs or who meander along the path with their walking stick at the speed of a curious toddler or a dog sniffing the latest news on the path. Moving on land was once simple for me—as a walker, hiker, and runner—and suddenly it became complicated and disorienting. Using a stick as my third leg during my regular walks in Halifax's North Common, I became acutely aware of people approaching me on the path: I didn't want to hold anyone up and I wasn't confident I could right myself if I had to step aside quickly. Was I in other people's way? Was I now the annoying creature causing problems, moving where she shouldn't?

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Walking has enormous benefits—physiological, mental, emotional, and more—and while all of us can benefit from it, not all of us are able to. I've known dedicated walkers whose praise for walking is rhapsodic, bordering on sanctimonious. I envy writer friends whose need to walk is intense, compulsive, sometimes obsessive. Kenneth Grahame, author of *The Wind in the Willows*, described walking as a time when the "mind has shaken off its harness, is snorting and kicking up heels like a colt in a meadow." Nietzsche claimed that "only thoughts which come from walking are valuable" (Stephen Hawking would like a word). Rebecca Solnit writes that walking is a good cover for the "nothing" practice of thinking. Since our culture doesn't believe thinking is doing anything, if we want to think, we go for a walk: "the something closest to doing nothing is walking," she claims.

But are thinking and walking nothing? For a lot of people, to be able to walk is everything. It is a gift to be ambulatory, to simply rise and move, a freedom not available to everyone. And, if we become infirm or disabled we may realize, as poet Jane Kenyon did in her poem, "Otherwise," walking may not always be available to us:

*I got out of bed  
on two strong legs.  
It might have been  
otherwise*

Since childhood, those halcyon days of two-mile walks to school (uphill both ways in torrential rain and crippling snowstorms), I haven't thought of walking upright or any considerable distance as a gift, nor have I understood how ableist my assumptions about walking have been. Now, decades on, dealing with my body's new adventures, I rejoice on the days I can leave the cane at home, days when I can walk a kilometer with ease.

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Filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha reminds me that walking can be a colonial act. I wonder if she's referring to the widespread phenomenon of walking as conquest—as in “I did the Camino” or “I did Hell’s Point” or “We walked all 900 km of the Bruce Trail.” According to her, walking as tourists or travellers can be engaging in “consumptive spectatorship.” She tries to walk so that her body receives, rather than tries to claim, the landscape.

I find echoes of Simone Weil in the idea of receiving a landscape as I am moving on it. It may require giving myself over, emptying myself of my ego desires, my brain’s chattering, my must-dos, a demanding task in itself. She writes: “Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.” If I empty myself of my grasping tendencies, would it help me to re-examine my long-ingrained human impulse for consumption and extraction?

And if I emptied myself as I walked in a familiar landscape, for example, if I found myself watching the grackle in the yard and learned something about the bird’s behaviour, would that be a kind of consumption? Does having a destination in mind (to the shore) or a goal (to notice the trees’ new buds) make me a consumer, by dint of the benefits I receive? How do I characterize the differences among consuming a landscape, appreciating it, and being open to it? I don’t know the answers, but I am willing to try. I am a Métis woman raised in North American settler society, complete with its extractive and acquisitive values, and as a result, emptying myself in order to receive will necessarily shift my learned relationship with a landscape. And as we know, the Western world’s consideration of the so-called natural world, the earth itself, is not unlike its consideration of women and marginalized peoples: we are Other. The Other is to be managed, controlled, shaped, and redirected, typically with means far more invasive and consequential to the earth and its populations than the use of a fly swatter or a mousetrap.

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And I also wonder: who knows whether the spaces I enter, whether or not I consider them sentient, want me there? I am to the land, to any space, what the magpie is to the farmer’s field and Little Brown Mouse is to my home. As living creatures, we can all be considered invaders to another’s place. When we move, we alter a landscape whether or not we tiptoe or carry out our litter. We are blots occluding the view. When he is in a field, Mark Strand writes, he is “the absence of field.” And when he moves, the air fills in behind him.

I return to my earlier question: what if we erased the notion of Other and thought of the land and creatures moving on it as kin? In that case, Patty Krawec asks, “How might we become better relatives to the land?” An understanding of the concept of Wahkohtowin —a Cree word referring to our wholeness, our kinship and interrelatedness— informs the lives of Indigenous people in many parts of the land we know as Canada. This kinship honours the rhythms and movements of those around us in ways less antagonistic and hostile than Western perspectives have invited to date. Honouring land as kin is a cooperative and hospitable stance, a way of being in the world that invites stewardship rather than ownership.

It invites conversation rather than confrontation.

The other night, months after I last saw Little Brown Mouse and its companion, I was sitting in the armchair downstairs when I caught a movement in the corner of my eye.

Ah, you're back, I said.

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**LORRI NEILSEN GLENN**'s forthcoming book is *The Old Moon in Her Arms* (Nimbus, 2024). An award-winning teacher, researcher, and writer, Lorri served as Halifax's first Indigenous Poet Laureate. Her nonfiction and poetry titles include the award-winning *Following the River: Traces of Red River Women* (Wolsak and Wynn) and *Lost Gospels* (Brick Books). Lorri's poetry and nonfiction appear in numerous journals, magazines, and anthologies, and her work has been adapted as libretti. She is Professor Emerita at Mount Saint Vincent University and a mentor in the University of King's College MFA program. She lives in Nova Scotia.