

The Ears of My Ears

This is an exclusive excerpt for USA Today readers from *The Point of Vanishing: A Memoir of Two Years in Solitude* by Howard Axelrod (Beacon Press, 2015). Reprinted with permission from Beacon Press.

Not far past the buried stone wall, by the intertwined birches that arched over the trail, I stopped to listen. Two chickadees were singing back and forth, a two-note song, slow and plaintive: *Fee-bee. Fee-bee.* In between the calls there was just silence, the sound of my own breathing. The calls seemed to hang the woods like an enormous tapestry, to stretch the air and the trees to their proper proportions. But I couldn't see the birds. At each note my eyes climbed branch after branch, scurrying higher up, farther back, but there was only the intricate white latticework of the branches. The song went again. *Fee-bee. Fee-bee.* But I saw nothing.

They had been my best neighbors all fall, a rare flash of movement among the leaves, little black and white sparks more curious than the squirrels. On the dirt road, a flying fist would follow me, its jumpy flight pattern so close I could hear the thrum of its wings—the rise, after every floating dip, fired by a wing burst, a tiny fusillade of flight. When I stopped, a chickadee would suddenly alight on a nearby branch and wait, its small round black head, with the racy white bank-robber's mask, adjusting left, adjusting right, a charade of curiosity. *Oh, really? Really?* it seemed to say. The more I encountered them on my walks, the easier it was to understand Native American legends of *coyote* or *fox*—each black-capped chickadee a particular companion but also becoming a part of the idea of *chickadee*, some playful and intrepid winter spirit of the woods. I couldn't help liking them. To walk the road, even when no chickadee appeared, was to feel its company, to remember the small, inquisitive face from the day before. It was my court jester, my Northeast Kingdom little fool. But now, for whatever reason, the chickadee was done showing itself. The white mask had slid off its face, expanded, and become the entire snowy woods.

I jammed my poles in the snow. Damn little birds. My encounter at the café was still humming inside me, and I wondered if that's why I couldn't see. The girl juggling in her silver

wig, the mother's hand on the back of the chair, the way they looked at me as I left. It was one thing at the C&C to stand close to the cashier—usually it took an afternoon to settle back into the visual quiet of the woods, to stop having flashes of spiky eyelashes and the colorful array of foods—but something deeper had been stirred up this time, a readiness I'd forgotten about, and it seemed a grave weakness, something that could lead to a derailment of why I'd come to the woods. I felt like the second monk in the famous story about the woman crossing the muddy road. The first monk picks her up and carries her across the mud, so her kimono won't get stained. The second monk becomes greatly agitated as they continue on their way, "Why did you do that? You have betrayed our oath!" The first replies, "I put her down on the far side of the road, but you are still carrying her." It's not that I thought of myself as a monk, but if I was going to be *like* one of the monks in the story, I at least wanted to be the virtuous one—the one pure of mind rather than pure of deed, the one who follows the spirit of the law rather than the letter. And the spirit of my own law meant that I wasn't supposed to think about anyone in town, wasn't supposed to think about any kind of relationship. It would be an easy way out, a shortcut to identity, a way of making myself feel good that I wasn't ready for and didn't deserve. I worried I was still carrying the mother and daughter with me. And the woods seemed to agree. They weren't taking me back so quickly.

I looked down at my snowshoes, rested my neck and shook my head, trying to clear the inside of my eyes. By the time I looked up again, my eyes were soft. Just the tangle of the high branches, the blue palm of the sky. I wanted to calm myself, to let my vision go wide, to feel myself not trapped inside branch after branch, to see without the possibility of any labyrinth. And then there was a streak. A gray blur lifting from one tree to another. My eyes didn't chase. The blur went again, a bit to my left. And there, hunched in a ball against the wind, feathers slightly ruffled, adjusting itself on a snowy twig, was a bird. Tiny black head cocking left, cocking right. My heart rushed. It wasn't so high up after all. My long lost friend! I wanted to raise my arms in greeting! And, with another blur, there was the other one, just a few trees away. I had slipped behind the mask—here we all were together!

Eventually, as I resumed snowshoeing up the hill, my error dazzled me. Instead of just looking for a change in the air, I'd been hunting for an individual chickadee—a little tuft of gray and white and black in the snowy trees—which meant training my eyes only to see one thing and effectively blinding myself to everything else. But relaxing my eyes, and opening my gaze to movement, was to allow myself to see the smallest changes, to see, in a way, what the forest saw: the space between the trees, the lines of the branches, and any movement that might happen there. Maybe this was the way to see, to let my eyes be like ears, simply open to space and whatever might enter it: no limit on depth, no limit on possibilities. I pushed up to the top of the rise and looked out over the vista. The sky was perfectly clear—pale blue above the far white mountains and darkening blue up the vault.

As I stood still, breath smoking in the cold, I had the feeling that the mountains were a true mirror, because they didn't *try* to see, didn't get lost in the vast surface of details. They excluded nothing. There was no part of me they didn't accept. And the reflection they offered would never shatter: no accident or heartbreak could take it away. It was essential, not relative. They just needed more time to give me a reflection that was a little more solid—something I could take back to the daily world.

Summer was an escape route, a perfectly open window, an excuse to leave if I wanted one. But the world had turned green again. The dirt roads were dirt roads: dusty and solid, swarmed on either side by leafy ferns, wild flowers, high swatches of grass, the grass itself swarming and clicking with legions of dragon flies, grasshoppers, mosquitoes. Deer stole through the trees. Red-winged blackbirds sang from the fenceposts. Ghost-white butterflies flitted in the heat. The green was a revelation, a prodigal son—a color that had once existed, gone missing in the snows, and miraculously returned. It opened itself through the hazed meadows, through the blue-green hills, through the reflections in the pewter green ponds; it deepened the blue in the pines, gilded the light off the streams, and relented only towards dusk, yielding to the slow antics of the fireflies, to the stars overhead, to flashes that felt like after- shimmers of the green, green days.

It made staying feel like a conviction. The surrounding promise that had tormented me during mud season—the purple branchlets of the birches, the pointed, brick-brown buds of the sugar maples, the scent of the wet earth returning to the air, every tree pushing into itself, into particular branches, into particular leaves, saying *here* and *here* and *here*—had finally come true. To stand and breathe amid that force, to feel it fighting into life all around me, had been quietly terrifying in May, as though I were falling behind while everything around me pushed ahead. As though the woods were planning a grand excursion, but I'd failed to do the necessary work to join, as though I'd been preparing nothing, while all winter the trees had been secretly storing up strength, making plans. It wasn't that I'd exactly caught up now. There were no leaves suddenly springing from my mouth, from my hands. But by October, as the nights grew chill and the approach of winter became a rumor in the air, there were signs of progress. Or, to be more precise, one sign. It came in a phone call late on a Sunday afternoon. Outside a cold drizzle was peppering the leaves. The sound of the refrigerator humming on, humming off, had already been a full conversation. I sat waiting, as though if I sat still enough, the ringing wouldn't see me. I didn't want to interrupt my meal. The textures had become spatial in my mouth, a village I was visiting—the grains of the bread were low stone walls, the honey glimmers of sunlight off a stream.

The phone stopped ringing, then started up again. My village withered into a hill town in an old postcard, a memory I couldn't quite recollect. It was a ghost town now, the ringing a plague that had driven everyone away.

“Hello.”

“May I speak with Howie, please?”

“Ray, it's me. Who else would it be?”

I was already settling myself on the daybed beside the phone. It was a wooden bench with a thin mattress, which was covered by a green flannel sheet. I sat cross-legged, my back against the wall, the high long windows to the woods in front of me. The phone hummed. I forgot I was supposed to speak. I was just looking at Ray in my mind, getting used to the pleasure of being

with him.

“How’s the weather up there?” he said.

It wasn’t small talk. Ray had spent summers during college as a camp counselor in New Hampshire, only about ten miles from my summer camp. We’d hiked the same mountains, camped at the same campgrounds, known the same pine trees and mosquitoes and lakes. But Ray had grown up in the hills outside San Francisco, in Lafayette—with the grass turning to straw in summer, with regular hikes among the redwoods in Muir Woods, with the ocean meaning the Pacific. As much as he’d enjoyed his summers in the White Mountains, the vistas there weren’t his vistas—not the palette, not the scale, not the smell of the air. And since graduation it had been on his mind. Nearly all his college and med school friends lived on the east coast, most of them in New York City. How much did your hometown, he often seemed to be asking, the place where your senses first gripped the world, really matter? And, though he didn’t quite put it this way, how much did your friends?

I told him about the leaves changing, their colors in the different weathers. I told him about my walk that morning in the rain, the mist rising from the meadow. I had the feeling I was telling him something personal. But as my mind passed by the stump from the pine sapling I’d cut for Linda and Bella, I didn’t mention it. How could I explain, and to my most moral friend, that I felt virtuous for ignoring a seventeen-year-old girl and her mother? In August, I’d seen a flyer at the C&C for a jazz concert in Burlington, and I’d asked Bella if she wanted to go. I’d told myself I was asking her for the right reasons, as a kind of educational field trip, a summer celebration, and not because I was nervous to go alone, or because of the way she looked in her jean shorts and halter shirt, or because my desire for the early morning meadow was spilling over into town. Linda had said she needed Bella at the café, there was too much work, and when Bella pointed out that some afternoons they had no customers at all, Linda, her mouth twisted between anger and a terrible instinct to please, simply said, “Case closed.” In my mind, ceasing to visit the restaurant had been to my credit, but just the prospect of mentioning it to Ray made me uneasy. Something didn’t add up. Some unseen evidence was assembled against me. Even in my

mind, it was becoming harder to articulate what I was searching for, and how I might succeed. It had something to do with the question of instincts—the right ones to follow, the right ones to ignore.

“How’s New York City?” I said, finally. “What do you see out your window?”

“I’m looking at the Hudson. That’s kind of nature, isn’t it? The sun sets over New Jersey and the water picks up the light. But my window is dirty, and it doesn’t open—so there’s no way to clean it.”

I wondered about myself, about being a window not opening. I wondered about what I wasn’t letting in.

“I did go for a long walk a few weeks ago around Central Park. It was a clear fall day, lots of people out walking and jogging. There had to be twenty thousand people in the park. Anyway, walking back I couldn’t help noticing all the dog shit on the sidewalk on Amsterdam and the smell of urine. The dogs have to go somewhere, but the urine just sits there until it rains, or until it’s absorbed into the sidewalk. It’s really kind of gross. I don’t know why I’m telling you all this.”

I’d been picturing the grime on his window, the sunset over the river, the brown stone wall around Central Park, the grass and roller skaters and joggers and pretzel vendors, and the sidewalk on Amsterdam, a street I didn’t know but pictured all the same, a narrow canyon below skyscrapers. I just wanted him to keep on talking. “Go ahead,” I said.

Ray exhaled deeply. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

I’d forgotten about his notorious preambles. “You’re not worried about me again, are you?”

“I don’t know where all that came from.” He’d given me a phone lecture during the summer about the need to contribute to society. He’d cited sources. “I think that had more to do with my doubts than it had to do with you.” He didn’t sound convinced.

“That’s OK.”

“But I guess that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Your doubts?”

“Sort of.”

“Go ahead, Ray. I’m listening.”

“Well, we have gross anatomy lab on Thursday. It’s a mandatory class. The lab is up on the fourteenth floor, and through the windows you can see people waiting at the bus stop for the cross-town bus, pedestrians going to lunch. So my group has an obese middle-aged woman. We were on her hand. It shouldn’t have been anything strange. We’ve been dissecting her for weeks. We’ve done the back and the spine and the thorax. We’ve done the brain and the face. I’ve had hard days, but for the most part you just go over to this other side. It’s a fascinating machine, the body, and it’s easy to see it that way.” He paused. “But for some reason the hand—it was her hand, a woman’s hand. And I just started to feel nauseated. I had to excuse myself. At the water fountain in the hall, my autonomic nervous system was going crazy. I remembered a fetus starts with its fingers webbed, and cells have to die for the hand to individuate into fingers. I remembered how I kept looking at people’s hands after learning that. I felt like I wanted to get on my knees and apologize for something. I don’t even really know for what.”

Ray fell quiet. The line went on buzzing. I felt a vestige of the instinct to say something, to reassure him, but the instinct was too far away. I’d been picturing everything he was saying—picturing him there among the cadavers in his white lab coat, the city going on outside with buses and people fourteen stories below. I stared at the birch tree out the window, a sodden feather of bark tattering in the wind. It seemed a reminder of the chickadees—a reminder not to hunt for what Ray was saying but just to let my mind’s eye go soft, to wait until there was movement in the picture. Then I noticed something. The cadavers and the students in white coats had one kind of light on them, and the buses and pedestrians and Ray had another. It wasn’t that Ray was standing in bright sunlight, nothing heavenly or weird, but just as though some movie director had been shooting the whole scene with Ray in a more natural light than the anatomy lab, shooting him according to the feeling in his voice. And the obese woman’s hand—it was lit with the sunlight, too, puffy and human, but the rest of her body, which was dried and purplish,

didn't look human at all.

"It sounds like two different worlds," I said.

"What do you mean?"

I told him what I was picturing.

"I guess," he said. I could hear the distance between us, how foreign my words probably sounded in his room high up in the city, overlooking the Hudson. But then he said, "You know, when I walk around the city, sometimes I feel there are different sets of rules everywhere. Sometimes even block to block. I know this sounds weird, but the city can feel like a science fiction movie. All these different dimensions. With the upscale stores on Fifth Avenue and the homeless people in garbage bags. The Upper West Side matrons and the cab drivers from Bangladesh. It just keeps changing. And changing. The values, the expectations. It makes me think of portals and worm holes, except you just have to walk and you keep passing through them. And the rules keep changing as you do. You can feel it. And I don't know which rules are mine."

I was still looking out the window at the birch tree, the rain slanting in the wind, but it felt like Ray and I were somewhere together—on those throbbing and changing streets but also suspended somewhere beyond them, in a realm where the rules didn't change, where they were universal instead of relative. Where the people and restaurants and stores still changed block to block, but where you couldn't help recognizing, where *everyone* couldn't help recognizing, the stars wheeling overhead, and the seasons following one after the next, and some center inside all of it abiding, enduring, staying the same.

"So, any advice for a poor city dweller? I mean, what have you found up there?"

I glanced at my plate on the table, my city of honeyed streams and multigrain walls. I wasn't sure if I was a fool or a prophet. "I wish I could answer, Ray."

"Nothing?"

"Really, I wish I could translate it. But I don't know how."

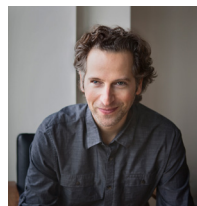
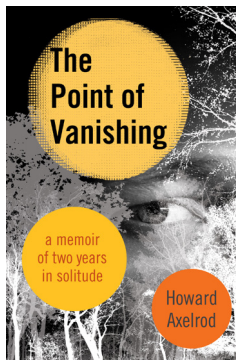
"Maybe once you get back," he said gently.

“Maybe,” I said. And for the first time in a long time, I believed it. The rain and the glistening leaves out the window weren’t just filled with shadow. I really was learning something—how to see, how to listen. I was learning how to move from the visible world to the invisible, and back again, which wasn’t a helpful skill just with chickadees but with people. I’d heard something profound in Ray—his loneliness, his lostness—and my own loneliness and lostness didn’t feel so strange.

“Good talking to you,” Ray said before we hung up.

“Good talking to you, too.”

HOWARD AXELROD’S work has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Shambhala Sun*, and the *Boston Globe*, among other publications. He currently teaches at Grub Street in Boston, where he lives. *The Point of Vanishing* is his first book.



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