

COYOTE DOWN DOG

by Charles David Kleymeyer



Many years ago, I experienced one of the finest of my now seventeen visits to Yosemite National Park. A California buddy of mine picked me up at the San Francisco airport, and we drove straight to the Curry Village cabin I had reserved in the park, grabbing a bite and hitting the hay early so we could hike up to the top of Yosemite Falls the following day.

The very next morning I awoke before dawn—at what would have been about 7:00 a.m. back home on the East Coast. My friend was deep in log-sawing slumber, so I slipped outside, crossed the road in darkness and cautiously walked a familiar path to the middle of a grand meadow in the center of the Yosemite Valley floor. The path was narrow and gently winding, and I could feel

the tall grasses brushing past my knees. Approximately in the meadow's center, I paused, planted my feet, and looked up at the vast dome of starry night sky. A sliver of moon was setting in the west and Venus was rising above Half Dome that towered nearly five thousand feet above me, its sheer granite face by now bathed in a soft, early glow. Rose-tinted at first, morphing towards stony golden. Our day was dawning.

Little by little I lowered my gaze back to the meadow and swept my eyes across the grasses from right to left. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I notice a moving shadow. I turned my head and stared straight at it in the growing light and barely made out the shape of a lone coyote rising stiffly from its nest-like bed.

Transfixed, I stood still as a rock spire. With a flowing motion, the coyote lifted its head and dropped into the most perfect downward-facing dog I had ever seen in my life.

Now, one might think that a perfect down dog by such a creature would be patently obvious, no? Coyotes are, after all, dog cousins. But it is not so obvious until with your own eyes you have seen a coyote doing down dog. This pose was simply exquisite.

As the coyote rose slowly back up to standing, I saw another movement, this time off to my right. It was a second coyote, head floating stiffly up, then dropping into its splendidly arching down dog. This act was followed by one silhouetted *canis* after another rising steadily up, and flowing downward. I soon found myself standing among a dozen to fifteen spine-stretching creatures. All of them early rising mammals like myself, now gently touched by sunlight and filling our lungs with fresh morning air.

For an instant I considered, and quickly rejected, dropping into down dog with the coyotes. No, no! That would be a sacrilege. This was their moment, their community. Not mine.

It was then that I heard a low note as if a taut bow was being drawn across the strings of a wooded cello. Other cello bows joined in from round the meadow. Noses pointed to the blushing pink sky, the coyote family was singing the sun up...and not just with individual abandonment...they were harmonizing! This audible reverie ebbed and flowed and wafted for minutes on the breezes, apparently without a single breath being taken by the choir. Om, sweet om drifted across the meadow, encircled me, and penetrated my chest, settling into my soul. I

did not join in, again respecting their rite. But the om-echo filled my entire body and mind, like fresh light rain.

Unwaveringly I maintained my mountain pose, as the song died away. Then one by one the coyotes faded into the woods and were gone.

For a long, long time, I stood motionless and silent, until finally I turned and walked back towards my cabin, feeling profoundly connected, not only with ancient India but with all the four-legged creatures that accompanied those early humans who treaded lightly over this same meadow.

All distinctions between two-legged and four-legged creatures steadily fell away. I felt as if I was inextricably woven into the fabric of the plant and animal worlds, joyfully unable to step outside it

and look in, as before this day. Cognizant that we are all of us, in the greater scheme of things, animals, and then one day we lie down in our final *shavazana* and die into the flowers and tall grasses. If we're fortunate we become molecularly part of an ancient Giant Sequoia and spend the next millennium ascending into the heavens. Stock still in the ultimate *vriksasana*, our eternal tree pose. And at our feet, future coyotes drop into down dog and rise up to sing in harmony.

As I arrived back at my cabin, I knew I would never do a downward-facing dog as perfectly as any of those coyotes. But as it turns out, in every down dog I ever did from that day on, there was a shadow of a coyote inside me, stretching and arching in that Yosemite Valley meadow.

Om...shanti...shanti...shanti...

