

AFTER THE DODO

Scott Samuelson—Editor

Not inherently attracted to the dodo, I was surprised to find myself so drawn to the skeleton of the extinct bird when I saw Harri Kallio's masterful black and white photograph of the dodo skeleton. This picture accompanies Ian Parker's *New Yorker* article, "Digging for Dodos" (January 22, 2007). I couldn't get the image out of my mind. I thought about it all of the time, mostly (I came to realize) because I was intrigued by the challenge of translating the image into a watercolor painting.

Others besides me are drawn to the dodo. Julian Hume, as a child living on the south coast of England, was a "bird and extinction freak," but is now a paleontologist, holds a PhD and a position at the Natural History Museum in London, and is part of a team digging dodo bones. As a serious amateur artist, Hume paints approximations of the dodo, the large, flightless bird last seen in 1688 on the island of Mauritius.

The Dutch sailors who came to the island in 1598 named the three-foot tall, fifty pound bird *dodaersen*, meaning "fat fannies." The English word "dodo" was in use twenty years later. Though human settlers had a hand in making the bird extinct, rats and goats and pigs that came with them beat the dodo in the competition for food and probably ate dodo eggs as well. The dodo bird makes a cameo appearance as a character in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

These facts, however, have had little bearing on my artistic project. My attraction stems in part from my general interests in bones and birds. I have found many bones in the desert just west of Rexburg, and I have painted them. My book with twenty wood- and linoleum-cut images of cranes will exhibit with the Idaho Center for the Book during 2008.

A mysterious narrative element in the Kallio photograph of the dodo skeleton drew me to complete a full sheet watercolor (22 x 30 inches). I was pleased with the result; I framed it and hung it in my office. I made significant changes in the reference photo—besides rendering the image in color, I included three mysterious hooded figures in the background and entitled the work, "Figures at the Dodo Museum." But one morning I woke with a terrible question in my mind: had I altered the image in the photograph sufficiently? Was I guilty of any kind of copyright infringement?

Since I was going to London in the summer, I decided to take my own pictures of the dodo skeleton, paint from those, and be copyright safe. Months later I rushed into the Museum of Natural History in London, almost ran up to the information desk and asked, "Where is the dodo skeleton?" They could not tell me. I was told that there *was* a dodo

reconstruction. I found it and was disappointed, and I later learned why in the *New Yorker* article. Parker quotes Hume, who says:

At the Natural History Museum in London there was talk of getting rid of these reconstructions because they're not accurate.... [It is] a full-scale century-old model of a dodo: a squat, fat exhibit made of goose feathers and plaster.

Plaster and goose feathers indeed! The dodo skeleton Harri Kallio had photographed seemed nowhere to be found. In dismay I decided to take one pass through the main gallery of the museum. Glancing into in a niche, I had a heart-skipping moment when I saw a skeleton of a huge walking bird. It was not the dodo, but something much larger—perhaps seven feet tall. I rushed to photograph it. If I could not have my dodo, I could have pictures of something close by. I was so excited I forgot to note the scientific name or read the explanatory sign.

A university institutionalizes and celebrates varieties of knowing. A university offers the healthy interests and intellectual and artistic passions of others for wholesome sampling—to faculty as well as to students. This issue of *Perspective* is a type of that sampling, celebrating religious, scientific, and artistic modes of engaging the world.

I share the story of my engagement with the dodo because it happens to be my current version of a phenomenon characteristic to each of us: we are drawn, often inexplicably, to interests that may seem strange to others. And yet a related phenomenon also exists: our interests may be contagious to those who are attracted to our passion because they have analogous passions of their own.

My London traveling companion, also an English professor in his early sixties, like me was able to recognize the dodo-like qualities he and I possess and the eccentric nature of my quest. We both look a bit outmoded, we waddle somewhat when we walk, and our bodies, at least, are bound to extinction. On the other hand, we are of curious interest to a select few, and we are not too stupid. Whether we will be supplanted by the rats and the pigs remains to be seen.

Our joking about the dodo-ness of our lives did not keep us from pursuing adamantly the dodo skeleton. I finally found one in the Museum of Natural History in Oxford and was disappointed in it. And we began asking some universal questions: Whence *this* interest? Whence *any* interest? When and how does an interest transform into a passion? To what degree is our chosen mode of engagement with the object the heart of the passion? Does the process of passion itself become more important than the particular current object of interest? I continue to ask these questions as I learn of the passions of others.

As I paint, I listen to books on tape, and I recently listened to Dan Koeppl's *To See Every Bird on Earth: A Father, a Son, and a Lifelong*

Obsession. Koepfel tells the story of his father, a “big lister”: one of the few people on the planet who has seen and listed more than seven thousand bird species. Why does this man spend thousands of hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars to see rare bird species?

One of the uses to which we put our abilities to read, think, and feel is to learn of others’ obsessions, passions, or interests. Usually, we do not share those passions. I’m not going to start listing birds, and no one reading this essay is likely to look up the Harri Kallio photo to do a painting of it. But since we have our own passions—or should have?—perhaps we seek relief from them?—or support for them?—by reading what other people have invested their lives in. Indirectly we learn about our own interests by hearing of other people’s. And we are brought into a diverse community of interest through this sharing.

Occasionally our own passions, or our interests in those of others, set us to responding. I responded to a photograph by painting a picture. Others may write a poem, research a topic, conceive of a dance, write an article, or talk to a friend. When our interest is engaged, we are sometimes driven to explore, create, and share—often in language.

A periodical like *Perspective* exists to give a viewing area to people’s interests and passions. In the spirit of gathering, *Perspective* exists to bring the like-minded together to learn, to celebrate, and to commune. To use my dodo story as a metaphor: *Perspective* is like a museum or an art show you are invited to attend, where words and images of your colleagues are on display. We invite you into this gallery, believing you will find much to pique your interest.

Robert Worrell’s Mind and Spirit Lecture, written in response to the prompt “How my scholarship informs my theology,” explores principles of sound reasoning as an avenue to truth, especially religious truth.

A starting point for the authors in the next section is an interest in science as a way of knowing (“science,” remember, comes from the Latin *sciens*, meaning “knowing or skilled”). From Brian Tonks’ discussion of the scientific method of discovering truth in nature, we move to David Johnson’s overview of intelligent design theory. Todd Hammond reviews his experience in the state legislature debate on teaching evolution and creationism in public schools. The section ends with Michael Young’s discussion of religious freedom and a call for religious tolerance.

Teaching is also a way of knowing—an idea explored in our “Hands to Help” section. Casey Hurley asks readers to consider flexibility in educational and career planning. A forum discussion entertains ramifications of preparing students for the world of work. The section is rounded out by two articles discussing students teaching students. The color section and the three “Tending our Garden” articles focus on visual

and performing arts as ways of knowing. Interestingly, all three discuss not just the arts themselves but the teaching of the disciplines.

As I think about it, I realize it was not the dodo bird I was primarily interested in, or even the dodo skeleton, quirky and sculptural as it is. Though a photograph grabbed my attention, it was not the image that finally enthralled me. Rather, it was the process of response. The urge to engage, to create *my version* of the subject, became my little passion. And I realize that it is the process of moving from interest to interest, from one way of knowing to another—could this be the heart of education?—that is my true and lasting passion. ∞