

Episode 34: Pep Talk
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If you can make peace with the unlikely fact that squid the size of school buses patrol the dark oceans at a depth that would crush you to paste, then I have faith you can also make peace with the unlikely fact that you are worthy of all the happiness you have imagined.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Many of us are scared right now and that's okay.

But, listen...

The first living cell on Earth was a spark. It ignited a chain reaction that thundered across millions of years, an evolving blaze of lives and needs and firsts and lasts. The whole of that raging fire of history and happenstance burns inside you right now. It is beyond amazing that you are here listening to this. You should be impossible.

Living is a rebellion. An old conspiracy of elements to organize and oppose the blunt, thoughtless, forces of the universe. We climb mountains. We swim against the current. We chip away at the expected. You are rogue matter. Your every active choice raises the flag of resistance. It would be an understatement to call you "rare." You are so much more than just rare.

The universe is mostly nothing, but there is a tiny percentage of material rebels like you. I don't know where you get the courage to be so unique, but I'm impressed that you choose to be here, possessing a physical body and making active choices in defiance of the norm. You are exceptional.

Today you did things that humans 50 years ago wouldn't believe and 200 years ago would struggle to imagine. You know the names of planets and the shapes of the bones inside you. You comprehend death and make art. You are a surpassingly strange creature, worthy of praise.

Do you realize what an adventure you are on right now? The dangers that you have already conquered to be here listening to my voice? Do you ever stop to give yourself credit for your achievements?

You are many incredible things, but you are not safe. Frankly, your birth was reckless. Lightning strikes without reason. Countless simple bodily mishaps may be fatal. To live is to collect risk like a bee collects nectar. But, risk is not how we measure success, is it? Your primary goal is not safety. It never was. Instead, concern yourself with becoming the truest version of you.

Every part of you is on an unbelievable journey. The conscious and the unconscious. No aspect of your physical or mental being is not extraordinary on a universal scale.

You see, the atoms in your body traveled farther than you can imagine, yet here you are. Most planets don't support life, yet here you are. Life on Earth didn't start on land, and yet, here you are. Your genetic map is profoundly rare, yet here you are. Remember all the impossible things you have already accomplished. What impossible thing will you do next?

And yet, let's not be too preoccupied with accomplishment, hmm?

Improvement is an admirable goal, but, remember this, there is no "best version" of you. There is only this version, which stands head and shoulders above all the hypothetical versions you can imagine by virtue of being real and here in the face of everything you have already overcome.

One incredible aspect of the human mind is our ability to choose to change. To acquire a skill. To alter our thought patterns. To adopt new behaviors. If ever you feel that you've stopped "becoming" and started simply continuing, remember this wonderful feature of your brain. You control this feature.

Frogs, butterflies, jellyfish. Their lifecycles contain startling shifts in form and behavior. And you? Are you the same person you were 5 years ago? 15? Time and biology are agents of transformation, but so is knowledge. Leave room for the next version of you. Be a new animal. Be ready to love that new animal.

Of course, potatoes existed for millions of years before French fries were invented, so don't be discouraged if you feel like you haven't found your best self yet. Life isn't a game you are trying to win. We just learn to take pleasure in playing it.

You might find yourself being afraid to try and seek change or comfort or fulfillment because trying can feel like vulnerability. Here's something I have learned. Effort will not always lead to the result you had in mind, but effort will not betray you. Write the book. Make the art. Risk the love. Strive for wellness. Effort does not make promises, but effort will not betray you.

And still, I remind you that you aren't looking to complete yourself. I often remind myself that there is no one thing that will complete my life. I hear so many suggestions that we are all jigsaw puzzles with product-shaped pieces missing, but I find that life feels emptier the more things I collect. Better to leave room for the green and growing. For nature. For wilderness.

You yourself are a wilderness. The avg human body has as many bacterial cells as human cells. Our DNA is secondhand, shaped by the flora and fauna that tasted the air before our eldest ancestors. Our blood remembers the sea, our hands the treetops. You are the outdoors. You are nature. You need neither products nor achievements to find perfection within yourself.

We may be quarantined, yes, but look around you. Your shelter may have walls, but your home is a boundless wild you share with 9 million other species. I'd argue that those nonhuman microbial cells within you are still you. You are a crowd within a crowd within a dynamic sea of staggering scope and diversity. Walls are an illusion.

Our blood is mostly water. It uses iron to bind oxygen which was built using the energy of sunlight. Water. Earth. Air. Fire. You may feel separated from the natural world, but just look at the family resemblance. You were not just born to this place. You are born of this place.

Your brain, the seat of your consciousness, is as natural as a leaf. It arose in the world in the same way as a finch's wing. A cricket's song. Wherever you are right

now, the part of you that's awake and hearing this is in nature. Your thoughts echo from an ancient wilderness.

And, still, our complexity is such that we struggle to understand even the most basic aspects of ourselves. This, friends, is wonderful.

There is nothing any of us could have done to earn a punishment so cruel or an award so grand as being alive. All of us drawing breath are united in this circumstance of profound, exquisite strangeness.

We are ourselves. We are each other. We are the landscape.

Over the course of your lifetime, most of the cells that have formed the mosaic of your body have returned to nature. Most of the water that has fueled your life has returned to nature. The substance of your form is not fixed. It flows like a river to and from the wilderness. You are not metaphorically connected to nature. The connection is literal.

Our intelligence, our curiosity... some say these gifts come with a steep cost in that we know one day we will die.

Yes, one day we will die.

And?

What of that?

When you die, your component parts are already home. Your blood's Iron goes back to the earth. Your water returns to the cycle of sea and sky. And your thoughts? Your kindnesses? Well... Nature does not waste and the unknowable is as rich and sustaining as dark soil or autumn stargazing.

When we die, they may bury us or collect our ashes, but remember this: from baby teeth to skin cells and everything in between, most of the matter that has worn your name is already spread throughout the world. We bury our remains in the soil of our lifetimes, not in the place of our graves.

In the end, you were a part of the sky on loan to a body. A part of the sea that awoke to thought. A part of the Earth who borrowed a name. The essential piece of you that lingers is the love and knowledge that you set in motion while you moved through the waking world.

[Sigh]

Sometimes, it takes an effort of will to see kindness in nature, to see the magic inside the commonplace. The effort you spend on such things is a gift to yourself and a gift to the world. Remember that the act of interpretation can be a creative act. So, choose to create love.

I cherish a certainty that there are secrets beneath fallen logs, floating in the bright sky, and within my own skin that will not be known in my lifetime. I hear these almost-truths chiming like distant music and I'll walk toward that song with simple gratitude as long as I'm able.

You can look at any human life as the sum of a complex collection of chemical reactions,
in much the same way as you can look at any beautiful painting as a collection of pigments,
Which is to say, you can miss the point of most anything.

Yes. Your life is temporary. The sun is temporary. The universe is temporary. Existence isn't about chiseling stone monuments for the ages. It's more like baking chocolate chip cookies. So, lick the mixing spoon and risk a taste hot from the oven. Cookies aren't about forever. They're about sharing sweetness.

Kindness. Gentleness. Empathy.

These things are fires shining in the forest night. They must be tended, but in tending them we are illuminated. We become a target for things that thrive in darkness.

So, as ever, love is tied to risk.
And, as ever, it's worth the danger.

You are the mountain, but awake.
You are the rain, but breathing.
You are the forest, but unanchored.
You are the soil, but with choice.
You are the sunlight, but dreaming.
Soon, you will be these things again. Mountain. Rain. Forest. Sunlight.

So, what will you do until then?

Just as storms illustrate the value of shelter, pondering limitless space helps us appreciate our own limited bodies, the intimacy of touch, the objects within our reach. Our limitations are not a hindrance. They are the warm rooms in which we build the simple pleasures of life.

You won't see most of this planet. Under each rock. Beneath the waters. Secrets of air and soil.

Can you feel the joy behind this limitation?

That there is always a new thing to discover, a new way to grow, is one of the sweetest parts of living and it's free and inexhaustible.

I think life is a thing we borrow, not own. A stolen moment. A cool afternoon swim in a woodland lake. That borrowed water of life is the same for humans and falcons and aphids. The shape of the individual borrower is nothing. It's the water. The lake. The fleeting afternoon.

One of the best qualities about the impermanence of everything is that our small moments of happiness can carry the same weight as any cosmic event of unthinkable time and distance.

And yet, and yet, and yet... I know that sometimes there is a wounded animal in you. An animal that has gone too long without shelter. An animal that wishes the world had but one throat to squeeze. Furious. Strong and sharp and tired. I know that today you said "no" to that animal in your kindest voice. Thank you.

Kindness won't make you rich, but it will make you whole.

Please, take time to acknowledge the monsters you defy, the storms you weather. There are those walking this earth to whom your life would seem an uninhabitable rock jutting from an angry sea. Yet, there you are, stringing together days like flowers in your crown. Respect your own vital splendor. You are worthy of respect.

When I reach for purpose, I settle on this: Consciousness exists simply to be the doorway through which love enters the universe.

I've met folks who like to say, "Love is just chemicals."

To which I reply: Yeah? So is the churning inferno of the sun. So is the bedrock of the earth. So is the living fountain of a blooming cherry tree. If you need to call upon the word "magic" to fully appreciate the awesome beauty of all that which is vivid and real, do so.

There are many kinds of consciousness, but there is only one kind of life. The kind that's in you. The kind that's in lichens and ferns and oaks and cities of coral dreaming in sun-rich seas. We name things based on differences, but don't fail to love all that we share together.

Every life is a sound. The soft susurrus of jellyfish who have never known the shore. The sharp sizzle of deer fleeing through autumn corn. These sounds belong to the same unfinished poem as you and your fistful of years like copper coins. It wouldn't be poetry without you.

Remember.

We are all strange animals, so, act like it.

Show Notes: Episode 34: Pep Talk (00:21:42)

Credits

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