

FINDING YOUR HOWL

Jonathon Flaum



PART I

There were only 14 remaining red wolves in the wild in the 1970s.

These 14 were taken out of the wild in the hopes of protecting them in captivity.

When the captives' offspring were released back into the wild as an experiment, they seemed to do alright, save one life-threatening deficit.

They had forgotten how to howl.

Without the howl there was no leader.

No alpha wolf to guide so others could know their place in the world.

In their silence, the red wolves began to live in fear.

Some yearned to go back to captivity.

But one knew he never wanted to go back to the humiliating place where food was delivered rather than hunted.

This wolf's name was Mumon, and he knew that he had to find his howl if his pack was to survive.

Mumon decided to go on a journey.

He vowed to travel deep into the forest until he found something that resembled the howl he had lost.

When he heard it he would know it.

And in knowing it, he could once again attach the sound to himself and be the leader he knew was within him.

Mumon put many miles between the comfort he had known and the wildness he was after.

His hunger became terrible.

Finally he saw a deer and made chase.

As he was about to pounce he heard a sound, and it stopped him in his tracks.

It was the deer speaking to Mumon.

“Who taught you to hunt?” the deer asked.

“No one,” replied Mumon. “I am famished; it simply came to me.”

“But you are smaller than I am. What makes you think you can take me down and not be overwhelmed yourself?” asked the deer.

“I did not think. I simply know such things. I cannot say why.”

“It is the same way with your howl,” said the deer. “When you are hungry enough for it, it will be there. Thinking won’t be necessary.”

“The hunt is not personal,” continued the deer.

After saying this, the deer jumped an old log and ran ahead with breakneck speed.

Mumon was not deterred and in short order jumped to the deer’s throat and bit down.

Blood began to spill.

“Our blood becomes one and I hear your howl ringing in my ears,” gasped the deer.

“I don’t hear anything,” replied Mumon.

The deer made no more sounds.

As Mumon ate, he felt the deer's life taking root in him and cried. Mixing his tears with the deer's blood, he felt unspeakably grateful as well as ashamed.

After eating, Mumon felt exhausted. He cleaned the blood off himself in the river nearby and lay down on a flat stone to sleep.

Before he closed his eyes, he heard the ravens come to pick the bones clean, scavenging every last remnant of flesh.

Despite the sounds of pecking and scraping he went to sleep.

When he awoke a raven was perched next to him.

Your mark is on everything you touch," said the raven to Mumon.

"The marrow of the deer's bones was drenched in your howl. To find it again you must shed the shame you feel for being what you are. You are a wild animal and feeling shame for that is akin to feeling shame for being born into this world," said the raven.

"Mumon walked over to the clean bones and put his face to them. "Is it so bad that I feel sad to have to kill in order to live?" Mumon questioned.

"Sadness is one thing, but that was not all you were feeling. Shame distorts us; it does a different kind of killing. Listen to the bones, there is no resentment or blame in them," spoke the raven.

Mumon turned his ears to the bones. "I hear nothing," said Mumon.

"Because you are using the wrong thing to listen," the raven said.

"Tell me how," said Mumon.

"You already know," replied the raven.

Mumon was alone again and the forest became still.

The canopy of trees settled and took root inside Mumon.

Soon, the energy of the deer arose within Mumon and with it the urge to run.

With each mile, the self he knew was stripping away.

All the years in captivity, the scheduled feedings, the patronizing voices,
it was all giving way to the wind.

Evening became night and the days gave way to weeks and the energy of Mumon did not cease.

He was becoming something else, something he didn't recognize but with which he felt
a frightening intimacy.

He no longer felt he was running ahead; he felt now as if he was running deeper down
into something, as if his legs were a drill coring the Earth's center.

Mumon's power was palpable. It was shocking to him at first.

But in time he claimed it as his own.

Mumon then came upon a farmer with the look of fear in his eyes.

The man had a gun pointed directly at him.

If Mumon had been looking with his eyes and listening with his ears, he may have heard
the blast of the shot rattling out of the double-barrel chamber.

Instead, he looked into that chamber with his spirit and entered it.

The wound dropped him down to the center of the Earth where he heard the chanting and drumming of a tribe dancing around a fire dressed in the costume of the red wolf.

The people were summoning the ancient spirit of the red wolf for their own power as hunters. The beat of the drum seemed to be coming from Mumon's own heart.

Mumon walked straight into the center of their fire and was not burned.

Without thinking or asking why, Mumon simply howled. The sound was of the Earth's very marrow.

The ground shook and the people danced and drummed with unbridled abandon.

In Mumon they saw a vision of themselves. Mumon was no longer alive as he had been before the journey began.

He was on fire now, and he was howling.

Captivity was like a dream and freedom was the real experience.

When Mumon came back to himself, he saw that the drummers were in fact his own pack and the fire was a rock.

When Mumon looked up he no longer saw the middle of the Earth, but instead stared at the bold, bright full moon.

The pack replied to Mumon's howl with a howl of its own—one that even the moon could not ignore.

The red wolf had become its howl.

The trauma of near extinction and captivity had given way to freedom—an ever expanding freedom.

PART II

To find our howl we have to pay a price. As Mumon did, we may have to sacrifice everything, spend a significant amount of time alone, do things that we believe we can't do, and walk away from a life that no longer fits our expanding need for freedom. This process may feel like a death. At its most intense, it may terrify us, and at its least intense, unsettle us. This is the price of finding our howl, our own one-of-a-kind authentic voice, and there is no way around it. Once Mumon knew what he had to do to recover his internal dignity, and in so doing authentically connect with his external world, there was no turning back. For Mumon, as Robert Frost admonished, the only way out was through. It is this way for us too. The only way out of our self-erected prison is to go through it completely. There is no quick escape, every square inch of our imprisonment must be touched and lived through before it can be abandoned. This truth was extremely disappointing to me at first. When I was younger I believed there could be a quick escape and freedom was accessible to us so long as we were daring enough. But I learned over time that if we don't live through our particular brand of prison all the way—our neurotic patterns, our fears, our disguises, our lack of faith, etc.—we are destined to repeat and re-create them regardless of what job, relationship, or circumstance we are in. It is better to stay right where we are and tunnel through the depths of it once and for all than to jump out in search of a new context right away—the old one follows us.

I first learned this from Nick Thompson, my fifth grade classmate, who wrote a story that caused me distress. Let me preface this by saying that I hated the fifth grade. It was the year I got a bad case of chicken pox and had Mrs. Horowitz for a teacher. Mrs. Horowitz couldn't stand kids and she made it no secret. I remember her as ugly. Ugly is a word I don't use and I am surprised it comes up here, but that's how I remember her, with a look on her face that always said, "just try me..." It was Mrs. Horowitz's job to teach us penmanship among other things and she was a stickler about it and an unkind critic. As a result I defied her, and to this day cannot write in cursive. I learned to sign my own name and stopped there—I took the failing grade rather than her abuse.

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An assignment I still remember from her, the only thing that bordered on creativity that year, was the task of writing a short story. The topic could be of our choosing; the only rule was that it had to be at least five pages long—which is a lot for a fifth grader to write. The grade we received depended more than anything on the length we could achieve. Once again, I didn't make the grade because my story wasn't long enough. But Nick Thompson got an excellent grade because he was the only one able to make the length requirement. I thought Nick cheated by nature of the repetitive trick he found and bragged to us about. I realize now that Nick hadn't cheated at all, that he in fact got hold of a story that was truer than any of us 10 year-olds could have imagined, but that Mrs. Horowitz must have experientially known was true—perhaps I underestimated both of them.

The story Nick wrote was of a tiger in a cage that lived in a zoo. He described the cage and the zoo and the tiger's desire to escape. Nick wrote of the tiger's strength and his ability to jump high.

So after a time the tiger planned its escape late in the night in the dark and jumped out of his cage which was open at the top. But to the tiger's dismay, after all that careful planning, waiting for the right moment, and hoping, he woke up to find himself in another cage in another zoo. The tiger would eventually regain his composure and plan his escape again, but each time he did he landed in a new cage in a new zoo. Nick wrote not just five pages but ten and he could

have gone on infinitely, he said, as he ended the story with an ellipsis rather than a period like the rest of us. Nick said that the tiger's torment went on infinitely, a concept we had recently learned in math in relation to parallel lines and their ability to go on forever without touching. I remember being stunned, "you mean the tiger never escapes?" "Never," Nick laughed, "there are infinite cages in infinite zoos all lined up across the earth and there is no way for him to get out of one without jumping into another."

Nick had written like Sartre or Camus, but rather than be crushed by the absurd trap of existence, Nick laughed at it. He was a young nihilist with the only A on the assignment, and he had become Mrs. Horowitz's favorite student. I remember hating his story and the sound of his laugh when he read it aloud. I identified with the tiger and felt awful for him. I hated Nick because he had written something that was too true. Nick wrote about the way life works.

In Nick's story the tiger uses his skills to get out of a situation which, on the surface, seems possible to escape. But what he never realizes is that the cage and zoo have become a part of him and he brings it with him wherever he goes. Nick's lesson is this: there is nowhere to run! This is our situation in a nutshell.

For the cage to drop away it has to die, and this means that we have to die with it because, for reasons beyond our control, we have become identified with the cage and are one with it. The only antidote is to stay and examine every square inch of the cage, become aware of its construction and our collaboration with its apparent solidity. We have to become aware that we created the cage and, hence, the cage created us in its own image so that we identify with it and, though it has

become a prison, it is also a home. It is our strangling job or marriage or overall identity—familiar and safe but soul killing. There is no easy escape from a situation that we ourselves created, because that situation, despite appearances, is no longer just outside us, it lives inside us and is programmed to re-create itself at the first sign of emptiness. To overcome the cage we must overcome ourselves—and this means not jumping over the fence from one surface to another, but digging under the very ground we stand upon such that we come out the other side.

The frightening part is that the tunnel we dig is dark and uncharted and is ours alone. We have to dig down through the accumulation of our stuff, our personal history, our genealogy, our culture, our choices, our fears,

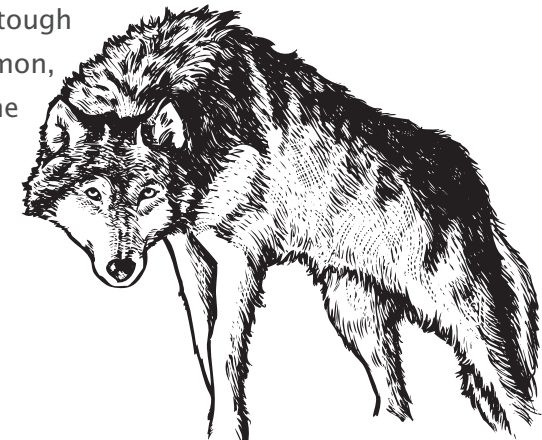
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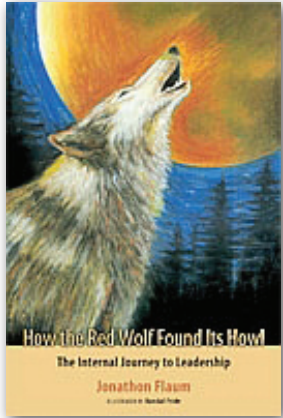
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and our need to feel safe. And to move through the dark underground tunnel into the other side where there is light and a new life, we have to let everything that we examine go along the way and show up with nothing. And this is terrifying, to let go of all that we think we possess. It feels like death, and it is in a way. We relinquish what we had in order to open up to the unknown.

This is where the alchemy comes in, where suffering is transformed to healing and imprisonment to freedom. It is by completely releasing the hold on our inauthentic voice that it releases us and our authentic voice shows up. The scariest part is when we are in the air releasing one trapeze and not yet touching the other, because unfortunately, it is only when we release the old completely that the new one appears. We feel like we may be falling to our death but there is no other way to freedom.

Mumon's death of his old self dropped him down to the center of the earth so he could re-emerge into life anew. This is the way for us—not to jump out of our pain, but to tunnel through it and find the center of life that is bigger than our little cage ever was, and more benevolent than we can imagine. I don't know what to call that center and there is really no point in naming it. What I do know is that it makes authentic expression of who we are possible. The tough part is that the only way to it is to find our way in the dark. But, like Mumon, we have to trust our instincts, press on, take the help offered to us by the wise ones along the way, and not be satisfied with achieving anything less than our genuine howl. 🐺





BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Flaum's [*How the Red Wolf Found Its Howl*](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathon Flaum is Founder and Director of The WriteMind Institute for Corporate Contemplation. See writemindinstitute.com for full details. Jonathon is the author of *How the Paper Fish Learned to Swim: A Fable about Inspiring Creativity and Bringing New Ideas to Life*. He is also the co-author of *The 100 Mile Walk: A Father and Son on a Quest to Find the Essence of Leadership*. Both books were published by AMACOM BOOKS in 2006. His work has been featured in *BusinessWeek*, *The New York Times*, *Investor's Business Daily*, and on 800CEOREAD.com. This manifesto is based on his latest book, *How the Red Wolf Found Its Howl: The Internal Journey to Leadership*.

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