

smelly neighbours test eileen delehanty pearkes'
concept of *aparigraha*: taking what is necessary

room for everyone

the third in a ten-part series exploring the
yamas & niyamas

A while ago, some skunks moved in under my writing studio, an old potting shed that I'd converted into a quiet space for my work. The shed sits on four cement pilings that leave about fifteen centimetres between the floorboards and the bare ground. I heat the studio with a woodstove. It was an understandable move for the skunks: no excavation required (though their sharp claws are designed to dig dens); heat included in the rent; attractive garden location.

One evening at dusk, I spotted two adorable skunk kits wrestling on the ground under the apple tree beside the studio. I regularly saw the distinct black and white striped animals loitering around my compost, usually at dusk or dawn. I sometimes heard rustling noises beneath the floorboards as I tapped on my keyboard.

illustrations by shawn kuruneru

When my family acquired a new puppy, she quickly discovered the skunks. As the two different mammals got to know each other, the skunks began to spray their characteristic musk in response to the puppy's mixture of curiosity and aggression, often at the edge of their den or right beneath the floorboards of my studio. My world took on an unmistakable, sulphurous aroma.

Aparigraha is the final of the five *yamas* listed by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. Forming the first of the eight limbs of yoga outlined in this ancient text, they are foundational principles of behaviour that govern a yogi or yogini's interactions with the world. They guide us in how to relate to our surroundings, both human and nonhuman. While some translations of the *yamas* define them as "behavioural restraints," the more I study and attempt to apply them, I see them as "natural behaviours" – principles that are at once genuine and poised.

Aparigraha is commonly defined as taking only the food we need to sustain our bodies. Its literal translation, according to T.K.V. Desikachar, is "hands off" or "not seizing opportunity." It is also interpreted as taking only what is necessary, or not taking advantage of a situation. Practising *aparigraha* counteracts the human tendency to hoarding and greed. It inspires balance, moderation and the sharing of one's world.

Skunks are nocturnal and reclusive. Usually they live alone. In spring, mating brings them together briefly. The

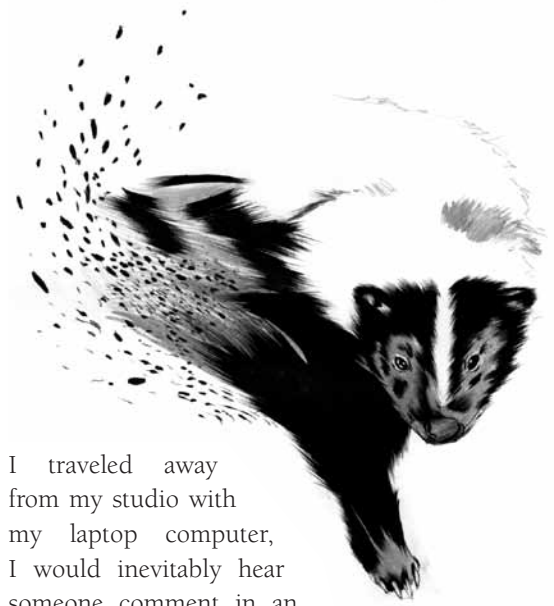
male retreats after that, while the female raises her young. In winter, though they do not technically hibernate, they are inactive and feed rarely. Often a lone male will winter with a club of a half-dozen or more females. I could be assured that my studio was, throughout the year, either a nursery or a harem, or both.

The arrival of our curious puppy put the skunks on the defensive. Without having asked for the challenge, I became the third mammal positioned between the other two. *Voilà*. I had a skunk problem.

Aparigraha is an aspiration toward a state that is not entirely out of reach for me as a member of the human species. Yet I have found that taking my "hands off" the skunk problem has required a level of acceptance, compassion and empathy that beats out the headstand for personal challenge in my practice of yoga. As I continue to discover, the *yamas* and *niyamas* are integral to a yoga practice. They weave their way between the *asanas*, the breath and worship of the Divine.

While the skunks and the dog jostled for position, the pungent fumes of their conflict filled my life. Some days when I crossed the threshold into my studio I nearly fell over from the intense smell. Skunk musk is repugnant to most noses, including mine. The good news is that familiarity eases its intensity. I did grow used to the unpleasant scent. I was able to continue to write.

The bad news is that the musk permeates whatever is in its path. When



I traveled away from my studio with my laptop computer, I would inevitably hear someone comment in an airport waiting room or a library about a faint skunk smell coming from somewhere. I would raise my eyebrows and say nothing, though I knew perfectly well it was my leather laptop case. Back home in my studio, I began to wonder whether my books and papers would survive the frequent dousing with musk or whether they, too, would be permanently impacted.

I began to plot how I might be able to eliminate the odour. The only certain way to do so would be to evict the skunks. At this point, I had my most real and challenging encounter with the principle of *aparigraha*. I learned something about the human tendency to both control and take advantage of situations.

In the natural world, animals find a balance with each other in part through the actions of the food chain. The presence of predators is a natural check on greed in the animal kingdom, as is a finite wild food supply. The human animal has negotiated around this natural situation by developing highly refined agricultural and resource extraction practices, as well as by protecting itself from – or eliminat-

ing entirely – its wild predators. The human animal is smart. We can build walls, fences and squirrel-proof birdfeeders.

The natural predators of skunks are coyotes, wildcats (such as cougars) and foxes. While the first two form a natural part of the ecosystem where I live, they do not have a high profile. I could not call upon the ecosystem's checks and balances to help me in this case.

Instead, I purchased a bottle of fox urine. Following instructions on the bottle, I "marked" the perimeter of my studio with the liquid and waited. Sure enough, the skunks relocated to a space under our (unheated) garden tool shed. I enjoyed a few months free of their musk. I was quite proud of myself, until the urine odour faded.

The skunks returned.

Various methods for trapping and/or removing skunks include live traps, non-lethal snares, guns and mothballs. Apparently, skunks respond to mothballs the way human beings respond to skunk musk. Once skunks are removed by any of these methods, the foundation of a building can be secured by covering any opening with chicken wire, then digging the chicken wire down into the ground at least thirty to sixty centimetres to keep the skunks from finding their way back in.

As I more seriously explored the nonviolent options available to me (in so doing, following another *yama*, *ahimsa*), I began to feel a strange sort of unease. I knew that the skunks had more than one reason for being drawn to live in my space. They are omnivo-

rous – eating insects, grubs, vegetation, small rodents and compost. I am an avid gardener and I compost everything I can. A few families of mice live next door to my compost bin. It's a rich source of grubs. A fine source of food for a family of skunks.

One day, sitting in my treasured personal writing space, I heard what sounded like a skunk sneezing under the floorboards. I found myself unexpectedly touched by this invasion of my privacy. These black and white striped critters were most certainly alive. They had carved out a space for themselves in my world.

I felt my mind's hold on the idea of evicting the skunks loosen. I questioned just how much the musky smell did bother me after all. The skunks were doing me no harm, the more I thought about it. I could allow them some of my compost and the space beneath my floorboards. Necessities for the skunks (food scraps, rodents and a place to live) were not necessities for me. I really did have enough to share.

It feels easiest and most natural to share with those who appeal to me and are members of my community: my children, my husband, my extended family and friends. The challenge increases when I make room within the larger world that I inhabit for those human beings or other animals who are not as close to me, who I do not know, who might be less naturally attractive to me or who behave in ways that sometimes interfere with my own enjoyment. These

creatures have needs just as I do for a share in the finite resources of the Earth.

Last week, I crossed the threshold into the studio and it once again reeked of skunk musk. The periodic doublings have definitely eased as the dog has matured, but they have not ceased entirely. They probably never will. My experience with the skunks continues to challenge me to live moderately and share with others, whether they are beneath my floorboards or in a crowded city far away from me. I can only hope that practising more sustainability and balance in my own home can make a difference in the wider world. ☸



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