



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Musical Messages of Birds”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

Ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you. Job 12

Be like the bird that, pausing in her flight awhile on boughs too slight, feels them give way beneath her, and yet sings...knowing that she hath wings. Victor Hugo

I pray to the birds because they remind me of what I love rather than what I fear. And at the end of my prayers, they teach me how to listen. Terry Tempest Williams

Sermon

Thank you, Jolene, for that lovely avian musical offering. You brought the sounds of birds into our sanctuary.

Since we focus on birds today it occurred to me that I could simply Tweet this sermon out. As co-founder Jack Dorsey explained, *twitter* means “a short burst of inconsequential information” and “chirps from birds”. [Sano, David (February 18, 2009). "[Twitter Creator Jack Dorsey Illuminates the Site's Founding Document](#)". *Los Angeles Times*.] I know a Twitter sermon limited to 140 characters might appeal to some, but even a bird brain can understand this won't do. After all, the ‘Twitter’ social media application wasn't designed for people with microphones at hand, especially preachers.

In the fable I told earlier a clever bird shared three pieces of wisdom:

- Don't believe anything that has never been done
- Don't regret anything that is over and done, and
- Don't try to do anything that cannot be done

Worthy as this wisdom is, it's unlikely to come from a bird. Although Betty Jean Craige's talking gray parrot Cosmo, once a guest at this Fellowship, might argue otherwise, it is only in fables and folklore that birds speak so clearly to humans. More typically, we must watch birds, listen to their calls and songs, and interpret their meaning to get a hint at what they might have to say to us. We've been at this for a long time.

Long before humans walked on two feet across the African plain, feathered creatures flew across the skies. Once *homo sapiens* arrived, human-bird interactions have been recorded in primitive cave drawings, in chewed, discarded bones near cooking fires, in myths told around hearth fires, and historical accounts and archaeological evidence proves birds were frequently a sacrificial offering to please a god.

For many ancient cultures, birds were thought to be holy and sacred messengers from – , companions to –, and/or avatars of – the gods. The Greek goddess Athena had her wise owl, the Norse god Odin had his raven pair, some Native American tribes embraced the trickster god Raven, Jesus had his Holy Spirit dove, and to many in Asia, the Pacific, and India, all of creation emerged from a cosmic egg. The ancient Greek and Egyptian phoenix bird still rises from the ashes to inspire people today.

Elsewhere in the ancient world, priests and shamans dissected bird entrails to read the omens and guide human behavior. Even bird flight held meaning – a bird flying left might mean bad luck was coming, a bird flying right the opposite. A raven or crow flying near might indicate a death to come.

Yesterday I officiated at a union ceremony for a Fellowship member and her partner which took place outdoors. At the start of the ceremony a bird swooped down over one of their heads. Later, she playfully asked me what that omen might mean. Even if only asked in jest, we are not so far removed from our ancestors in seeking meaning from animal actions.

Bird flight must have seemed miraculous to ancient peoples, maybe even a god-given skill. Humans couldn't break the bonds of gravity no matter how hard arms flapped. No matter how difficult the terrain for humans, birds freely transcended these limitations.

The ability to navigate the skies led many ancient religious people to believe birds communicated with the gods or spirits who lived in the heavens. In ancient Jewish understanding, birds of the air actually flew in the breath of God. The Hebrew word *ruach* means wind, breath, and spirit. It is no wonder birds came to symbolize free spirits and spiritual beings. It is no wonder bird flight, calls, and songs formed a language humans wished to decipher.

Today we study the movement of birds and other animals to learn what they can tell us about the health of our planet and what they can teach us about our impact on the web of life. Decades ago we learned that DDT poisoned our national bird. When female bald eagles laid eggs in their nest, the shells were not able to withstand the parents' weight. Eggs collapsed, killing the developing eaglets.

Fortunately, we listened, banned DDT, and eagles numbers are improving. Yet even as I speak, in California environmentalists are rescuing oil-drenched pelicans and other ocean wildlife from the suffocating effects of a new oil spill. It's a clear message about the cost of our reliance on fossil fuels and imperfect infrastructure. This omen is an easy read, though it's not so easy to change our ways.

On the east coast, *National Geographic* reports that not only are endangered species shrinking in numbers, even common birds not normally considered at risk are facing major loss,

like the cerulean warbler of the eastern woodlands and the piping plover shorebird. Some North American species have lost 80% of their population since 1967. Millions of birds lose their lives by colliding with city skyscrapers, communication towers, and even suburban homes. [“North American Birds Declining as Threats Mount,” by Mel White for *National Geographic*, June 21, 2013. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/06/130621-threats-against-birds-cats-wind-turbines-climate-change-habitat-loss-science-united-states/>]

I can attest to this last problem. One handsome grayish bird with a bright orange beak (likely a female cardinal) bangs into the front window of my house nearly every day, throughout the day. The glass above my front door is covered in scratches and maybe bird saliva or worse from all its banging. I assume it is fighting its own reflection.

Additionally, habitat loss, global warming, wind turbines, and what may be the current single largest contributor to songbird mortality may be domestic cat predation. All of these factors together create a new message for us, one told in silence – the absence of songbirds and their musical gifts.

But why do birds sing? What are they trying to communicate? A Chinese proverb says, “A bird sings because it has a song.” Charles Darwin couldn’t come up with a better answer than this, though ornithologists try. They know birds sing for love—males show their strength and vigor by singing through the night, hoping to impress and attract a mate. Some birds whistle an alarm, thus warning both their own flock and other species that have deciphered the bird’s code. Some birds coo to their young, teaching their songs to the next generation. Some birds sing to declare and defend territory.

But just because a song may serve a purpose doesn’t mean a bird doesn’t also just love to sing. David Rothenberg, author of *Why Birds Sing: a Journey into the Mystery of Bird Song*, points out birds expend a lot of energy singing with no clear evolutionary advantage. He adds, “Their music is essential, not arbitrary; playful but purposeful; repetitive, not boring. It possesses the necessity to which human art aspires.” [Page 10] Aspiring to art implies a sensitivity to beauty and a desire for something beyond mere function. Does the rooster crow at dawn because he’s happy to greet the new day’s sun? Does a songbird sing at dawn to express its own joy to live another day? I think it’s a human conceit to think only humanity sees beauty or feels joy.

As Sam Keen described in our earlier reading, when he finally saw an Indigo Bunting time seemed to stop. He recognized the honor of seeing that magical, mythical bird. He stopped. He looked. And he listened. I think that is the essential message of the birds.

They are beautiful in their infinite variety of color, shape, and sound. They are glorious to watch as they fly gracefully across a clear blue sky. They are amusing as they shower themselves with water in a garden bird bath or as they hop along on two stick-like feet. And birds still these incredible, musical virtuosos sing to anyone who will listen that life must be celebrated.

Swedish people have a tradition we might adopt. The word for this activity is *gökotta* [yo-KOT-tuh], which directly translates as ‘early cuckoo morning’. But it means to get up early before dawn, perhaps taking a picnic with you, to go out and hear the first morning birds sing and to appreciate nature. Gökotta. [http://www.hemslojd.com/swedish_ascension_day.html]

We may never really know why birds sing as they do. But I know we humans sing to express our feelings, happy or sad. We sing for the simple joy of it. We sing because we can. Maybe birds do, too.

At whatever time of day you can, may you and I remember to stop, look and listen to the birds, if for no other reason than to slow down, be amazed, and lift our spirits.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What message or wisdom do you receive from seeing or hearing birds? How might their presence in your life evoke new feelings or ideas? Please share.
2. Birds commonly symbolize freedom, wisdom, and messengers between human and divine worlds. What do birds mean or symbolize for you and does this inspire you somehow?
3. Are you envious of flight and a bird's ability to go places humans cannot? Why or why not?