

Back When Birds Could Speak
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

We are extraordinary beings; I marvel everyday when I think on it: at times proud, exultant in our attributes and power, and at other moments, keenly aware of our aloneness and vulnerability. So here's my nod to Will Shakespeare, on the 400th anniversary of his death, in lines that capture this spectrum of human self-regard and frank reckoning:

"What a piece of work is a man," he has Hamlet exclaim: "How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals."

And yet, after all that the Prince of Denmark asks: *"What is this quintessence of dust?"*

What are we? In the depths of night on the storm blasted heath, King Lear answers thus:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are...

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. ..

Thou art the thing itself:

... no more but such a poor bare,

forked animal....

Like a god, the paragon of animals; poor naked wretches, a bare forked animal—between these two poles the current of our minds and feelings course; perhaps always have once we stepped out of Eden. Fortunate, when well-grounded in our skin, our roles, values, loyalties and a caring community which uphold them and us; unfortunate, when accident and ill-health befall us, or by circumstance of birth and place, the dogs of war and the scourge of pestilence devour our land and livelihood.

No wonder then, we dream that we can fly, pass through walls, and behold and speak to the dead. No wonder, too, in nightmares we lose ourselves in labyrinths, imminent danger looms, but we can neither move nor breathe, nor save the companions beside us.

As I said, we are extraordinary beings, I think; who else in the kingdom of animals teach their young to sing: Row, row, row your boat/, gently down the stream./Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily life is but a dream?

It's Pentecost Sunday: and for you heathens, like me, that literally means the fiftieth day, this Sunday, since Easter; and no doubt, in some churches, a feast day of celebration (or so it says on my multi-faith calendar). In the wake of the execution of Jesus by Roman forces in Palestine, it must have seemed like a dreamtime to his companions—a nightmare of disappointment and real menace; a visionary interlude as well, with claims he'd slipped the mortal coils of death and, miraculously, was yet alive.

Here we are, imagine: tradesmen, fishermen, housewives, carpenters— Jesus' closest followers, plain Jewish folk from the sticks up in Galilee speaking a homely tongue of field and market stall, of rough hewn boats and smoky hearth fires. We've gathered in Jerusalem—it's a cosmopolitan, multilingual town with people from "every nation under heaven." With work calloused hands and our plain speech, how can we possibly give compelling utterance to the fever dream of the end of time with which Jesus swept us up, his call to repentance, compassion and renewal with the Kingdom's Advent about to break forth? And all we speak is our rough Aramaic, and we're supposed to spread his word out there in the streets where reigns a parliament of languages from every corner of the Empire—from Latin Rome to Persian Isfahan.

Well it was like a dream, according to the story: a mighty wind filled the house where his companions were sitting; tongues as of fire appeared and rested on each one of them; and from that place they walked out into the street and spoke—and lo! Everyone in their myriad native languages understood what these plain folk were saying.

Imagine a shaft of white light hitting a prism, and all the colours, the languages of the rainbow, fanned out on the limestone cobbles and walls of Jerusalem. Like the stroke of one key on a piano and every note played. No wonder, it says, “and all were amazed.” It was like before Babel, and its tower, and the confounding of language and people—that mythic time in the human story *way back* when we all still gathered around one fire; all of us, old and young, frail and hale, and in the dancing firelight shared the stories of our people, in the one tongue we all spoke in common. *Here we approach* the dawn of our time, at the very gates of the Garden from which we strode forth eons ago—the age of our near kinship with animals of forest and plain, fish and whale, and birds of the trees, thickets, lakes and seas all aloft on wing in the skies—when they, all of them, and we spoke and sometimes understood each other—so close in kith and kind were we back then.

Sounds dreamy? Well, people, we sang about it in our opening hymn! Unitarians in the 21st century (!)—singing the human family’s nostalgia, that enduring, tragic, beautiful longing to be at one with Nature and her myriad, extensive creatures and all her handiwork.: “Show to us again the garden,” we sang, “home of all creatures born of land and sky and sea...one creation; make us whole, interwoven, all connected, planet wide and inmost soul.” That’s what we sang, and long for. We long to be more than just *a poor bare, forked animal*, don’t we?; deeply somewhere in our being, we long for that age before the fateful hiving off of humans from our animal kin; back when we walked and talked in harmony in the Garden together. And, touchingly, movingly, we sing that it may yet happen again.

There’s a saying in Scottish folk tradition: “Back when birds spoke Gaelic...that was a time of joy.” I don’t know how I came across that saying, but it triggered this whole sermon; that, and though I know it’s a stretch, there was something that struck me about the chance

conjunction of today's Feast of Pentecost—that long ago outpouring of the spirit and the gift of tongues—and this weekend's International Migratory Bird Day. And it got me thinking about the imaginative literary genre where humans have imagined animals endowed with language we could hear and understand.

For at least twenty-five hundred years, we've been writing down and passing along fables about our animal kin. We've heard, and many of us know, stories told by Aesop of 6th century BCE ancient Greece. Among the hundreds of his tales, there are 45 fables where birds figure as main characters and endowed with speech. In ancient India, there are the Hindu *Panchatantra* tales—earthy and unsentimental, where birds appear as particularly adept in their ability to learn from hard won experience. There are First Nations stories of Eagle, Hummingbird, Owl, Thunderbird and Raven. In this corner of the world, we know Raven particularly well, thanks to the Haida people and their creation story of Raven and the First Humans—a story stunningly depicted in the Bill Reid sculpture carved from a giant block of yellow cedar on display at the Museum of Anthropology.

Stories of Raven, the tales of Aesop, of ancient India, Australia, Scotland and elsewhere show that our ancestors were keen observers of bird behaviour, and were, at times, able to depict them as creatures in their own right, not just as symbols of human virtues and weaknesses. The Gaelic *Colloquy of the Birds* is adept in its depiction of bird habitat, plumage, song and behaviour: brash magpie alights on a rotten branch of hollow alder; tawny owl perches silently in the cleft of a columnar oak. The depressive state and plaintive cries of the narrator of the 12th century Welsh poem Claf Abercuawg (claf abercogau) are met by the song of cuckoos in the woods, but not with sympathy, or fellow feeling, or human words—but in the voice given them

by Nature, a song beyond human care and joy; which, in the end of the poem, serves to bring real solace and balm to that afflicted, human soul.

I like how Raven in Haida stories is seen as a creature avid for amusement, action and change. Do we watch them? Raven may be a trickster, a loner, lustful, and greedy—but he embodies a truth that Nature is unpredictable and full of surprises: best that we be watchful, adaptable, and know, with raucous flocks of crows harassing and dive bombing Raven while it rows the skies on its great wings, there's a price to be paid for being a creative, mischievous loner.

Scholars of literature and history all agree that animal tales and fables that we've received down the millennia were based on older oral traditions and storytelling. "Animal stories," in the words of one scholar, "are as old as we are able to imagine." *Old as we are able to imagine?:* that, good people, takes us back a *long way* indeed, and to those night-time gatherings of our most remote kin, telling tales around the dancing flames and shadows of bonfires that kept chaos at bay in the dark and laid the groundwork of all that we call culture.

To be sure, most of the fables and stories of birds are, in fact, all about us—we are an ego-centric species, after all. *In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!* Hamlet says. *The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals!* Even as we project human attributes on the depths and powers of the cosmos and Nature and call it God; so too, from time immemorial, we have corralled birds on the wing and projected on them all our virtues and vices. That's not a bad thing; better that than blithely dancing to the music of time, uncaring and unconscious; better to hold up a mirror, in the guise of our avian kin, of our manifold selves, for good and ill, better that than imagining ourselves blameless, without flaw and immune to our deep seated needs for self-awareness, wisdom and emotional and spiritual depth.

Two examples: The old Welsh saga *The Colloquy of the Birds* is like a freestyle rap battle between magpie and owl. Each, in turn, disses the other; all eyes and ears of the gathered flocks are on these two antagonists—it’s probably ever been so, if we think on the attributes of magpie and owl. Says magpie taunting the owl: “Why hangs your silky head so heavy?/Is your tongue to be always locked without saying one thing or another?/You’re closed as an old grey stone/which sapless on yonder knoll we see.” To which Owl retorts: “Senseless is your chatter/I do not admire your glig-clag tongue,/ And never take pleasure in the hasty mouth./I will speak when necessary/and *my* mouth won’t bring *me* sorrow.” After lengthy back and forth in this battle of wits, the birds are confounded; when “down leapt the gray bird,” says the saga: a lowly meadow pipit, who then says: “Many people, many opinions;/some love what others hate...There’s a time for speech, a time for quiet/a time for play/a time for sorrow and a time for joy./Happy are those that get what’s right for them in due season.” To which the gathered birds then sing and wing away. (see: historyandnature.wordpress.com/2015/08/01/birds-spoke-gaelic/)

And then there’s the classic 12th century Sufi saga, *The Conference of the Birds*, by the Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar. All the birds of earth have gathered, clamouring for a king. Confusion reigns, when a hoopoe (hupu) bird steps forth and speaks. There is an ideal king, it says, the Simorgh bird; that is the King we seek. To gain audience with that mythic bird, all must undertake an arduous pilgrimage to its realm. But of that great flocking multitude, only thirty companions set out on the journey, led by the hoopoe bird.

Yes, it’s a mystical, Sufi allegory of the human journey from clamorous multitudes bogged down in the everyday world to attaining enlightenment. Each of the thirty companions embody a human virtue or vice. The parrot is seeking the fountain of immortality; the nightingale is the lover; the peacock, full of its resplendent plumage, is all about vanity, etc, with the hoopoe

as the sufi master—calming their fears, sharing riddling parables to provide guidance in their quest—for long and arduous is the path: “When you feel empty,” says the hoopoe, at one point when all are discouraged, “you have to open up your heart and let the wind sweep through it.” “The secrets of the sun are yours, but you/content yourself with motes trapped in its beams./Turn to what truly lives, reject what seems---/What matters more, the body or the soul?/Go forth, desire and journey to the Whole.” And so across seven mountains and valleys, they journey, until at last the companions finally reach the dwelling place of the Simorgh bird, the King. And to their surprise all they see is a lake nestled in a high mountain valley; and when they look into it—the reflection of thirty, road weary birds. The Simorgh is within us and each other; God is not separate and external from the universe, rather the totality of its existence. Or so the story goes.

Whether creatures in their own right, with their distinct personalities and behaviour or as stand-ins for us—in fable, saga and allegory—we have been telling stories of our avian kin for as far back as we are able to imagine: delighting in their beauty, their song, and quirky ways; lamenting our alienation, yearning for reconciliation with Nature, searching for insights into our own being, our failings, our strengths; celebrating pentecostal, pre-Babel moments now-and-then, taking us nigh unto the Garden itself, when we spoke in a native tongue and seemingly all under heaven understood us.

“Back when birds could speak...ah, that was a time of joy.”

I don't think they've ever stopped speaking to each other and us: in bough and bush and lake and lawn; aloft above our cities and along the strands of sea. “The poetry of earth is never ceasing,” wrote John Keats. “The poetry of earth is never dead; When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,/and hide in cooling trees, a voice will run/From hedge to hedge about the new mown mead.”

“Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!,” wrote Shelley in his *Ode to a Skylark*:

“Bird....,
That from heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.”

“Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul, wrote Emily Dickinson,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.”

Never ceasing, singing still, never stops at all—hope is the thing with feathers? It may be Pentecost Sunday, but it’s good to remember International Migratory Bird Day as well. And here, if ever, the birds speak still. Ten years ago, I told you about the extraordinary journey of the migratory red knot bird—a tough little sandpiper which annually wings nearly 29,000 kilometres from summer feeding and nesting grounds in the Canadian Arctic to the southern tip of South America. How they navigate, how their hatchlings, left behind by adults weeks earlier to bulk up and test fly, how those young birds just *know* the exact path to take, and when and where to stop briefly on the beaches of Cape Cod and Delaware to gorge on horseshoe crab eggs—all of this is a real-world miracle that fills me with awe.

And then just last Friday, I read that the red knots are under threat. They’re on a tight schedule and a vulnerable one: climate change is putting pressure on the birds along their entire journey. For example, the Arctic is warming up, insects are hatching earlier; by the time red knot chicks are hatching, the insects on which the red knot chicks feed are far past their peak,

and the young birds can't find as much food as they could 30 years ago. So, body weight is dropping, beaks are growing shorter which makes it harder for them to reach crab eggs and clams; the result is their population is in steep decline.

The spectacle and mystery of the annual migration of the red knots is one of the true wonders of this planet. Learning about their epic journey connects me with Nature in a profound way. I think red knots speak in a voice pentecostal—unmistakable; their one tongue can be heard and understood by everyone on this planet, if we will only listen to what they are saying. “We may not look like much,” they sing, “but we are your sentinels, and show with beak, feather and bone the warning signs, the rippling effects of climate change; take this our song seriously.”

In ages to come, stories will be told about us and our time. I hope there will be a precious few of them which tell of how we did not lose utterly our sense of reverence and responsibility; so that red knots will still fly from Arctic North to Tierra del Fuego and the earth still flourishes.

May hope and deed still be the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all

For the poetry of the earth is unceasing. May we yet sing it now and in the ages to come.