

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW
by Forrest Gilmore © 2007

Singing –
If I had the wings of a dove,
Wings that would take me where I want to go,
I'd fly to the utmost
Way out into space.
Oh no no no no, there is no hiding place.

Birds, especially their ability to fly, have always been profound religious symbols for us humans, symbols of transcendence, of freedom, of rising above it all. In the Hebrew Bible, the olive-branch carrying dove flies above the waters of the great 40 day-and-night flood to find land for Noah and his menagerie. Of Egyptian origin, the Phoenix after being consumed in flames, rises from its own ashes to live again. The Lakota people of the American Plains honor the animal of the easterly direction, the place of the rising sun, as the hawk. The hawk in its ability to fly high above the Earth and look from afar teaches us, they say, about perspective, teaches us to look at the whole picture, teaches us to rise above, watching over it all like the morning sun.

The song, "Wings of a Dove" calls us to a similar task, stirring in us the great longing to fly to the utmost, way out into space.

As a boy, this spiritual imagery did not escape me. I always wanted to be a super hero. Maybe some of you recognize that childhood fantasy from your own lives. I grew up in the era of Superman and Luke Skywalker. I remember daydreaming that through some grand mystery of the universe I had been granted one wish, the right to choose any super power I wanted. I usually came down to two choices: flying or being able to shoot massive fireballs out of my hands. I chose flying, most of the time.

In my night world of dreams, I flew dancing over mountains, forests, and

canyons, buildings, parking lots, and highways rescuing people in times of trouble, feeling the freedom of the air. I looked to flight for peace, for quietness, for freedom, a safe world.

I don't know but perhaps this love of flying led me to my future profession. Before I shifted my career path to ministry, I worked as a wildlife biologist, or more specifically, a field ornithologist. Simply put, I studied birds, living birds in the woods, on islands, lakes, in meadows, sometimes even in my own hands, and in the sky. Captivated by their soaring movements, their shapes, their flows, bends, turns, dips, dives, hoverings and glides, to this day, I stand awestruck at their power, perhaps even yearning for it.

And yet, as a wildlife biologist, I discovered something. Birds have so much more to them than merely their wings. For example, the Pine Crossbill whose beak has developed such that its upper bill crosses over its lower bill allowing it to pry open pine cones and eat the nuts inside. And the Blue Jay whose feathers are not actually pigmented blue but reflect light in a kind of prism effect such that they appear blue. And we rarely hear that individual birds have different personalities. And yet, some sleep more, some fly more, some eat more, some are friendlier than others, some are more attentive parents than others.

I remember an experience with a female Goshawk in the Kaibab National Forest, north of the Grand Canyon. This hawk was one of the most protective parents I have ever known, human or otherwise. My job was to search out active nests from past years and see if they continued to be active this year. Well, I found out in a hurry that this one particular nest was most definitely active as the mother hawk began dive-bombing me. And it's not like I was climbing the tree to get her chicks or something. I wasn't even

near her. Her nest was seventy-five feet in the air and I was fifty feet away from the tree that carried it. She would swoop down towards my head, screaming as she was about to hit me often hiding to dive at me from behind. She kept me trapped by her nest for over half-of-an-hour because I simply could not get away. Finally, I crawled my way out but she jumped me from behind again as I was getting into my truck, a good quarter-of-a-mile away.

I have a deep love for birds.

I recall a time some eight years ago now when I experienced, with intimacy, the fullness of one of these creatures. I worked for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, protecting and researching *Sterna hirundo*, a bird also known as the Common Tern. Everyday, I motored out to three small islands in the center of Lake Oneida to observe the nesting of these birds. Along with the terns, three other bird species, the Double Crested Cormorant, the Herring Gull, and the Ring-billed Gull nested on the islands.

In addition to the terns, I also focused my study and attention on the Ring-billed Gull. To provide some understanding of my experience with this particular species, Ring-billed Gulls have a nickname – flying rats. In particular, they are known for their use of feces to bomb human beings in places like mall parking lots, boardwalks, beaches, and three small islands in Lake Oneida.

Because of the growth of landfills, the population of Ring-billed Gulls grew enormously in the latter half of the twentieth century taking over much of the Common Tern's best nesting territory. The tern population crashed due to the human-induced abundance of this gull such that the terns I studied were the last inland nesting colony in New York State, a state once abundant with these birds (the reason for them being

named Common).

In order to maintain this nesting colony of terns, the other biologists and I had to actively protect one-and-a-half of the three Lake Oneida islands. We did this by covering the islands with fishing line about three feet off the ground creating a horizontal grid. The size of the squares in the grid (about 2 ft by 2ft) allowed the smaller and more agile terns to fly through and land and nest while the larger gulls unable to maneuver the grid had to nest somewhere else. It was a good plan, intensive, but it worked. And as every plan has flaws, this one did too. Sometimes gulls would fly too close to the lines and become tangled.

As birds were occasionally injured when they were caught, I didn't like that part of the job much at all. But it did provide me with a profound opportunity. As I freed the birds from the line, I had a chance to look and feel a living and breathing wild creature. To look so closely at an often extremely unappreciated, yet strikingly beautiful, being inspired a sense of awe in me, a sense of deep intimacy, a sense of love.

I remember one particular day.

The light shines brightly on this midsummer afternoon. The golden shimmer of the sun gently kisses the subtle rolls of the lake's surface. The deep blue water flows in such a way that to look at it feels almost as if I am tasting it – delicious, soothing, flowing, breathing, blue. My boat soars through the waves heading slowly but without doubt closer and closer to the islands and the birds I love. The beauty of the day reminds me how good it is to be a wildlife biologist.

As the islands approach, I head for the first of the three, named the Long Island, even though it stretches no more than a few hundred feet long and perhaps thirty feet wide. Closing in, I see a reflection of white struggling in the line. A gull trapped. Time

to move fast. Get the bird out. Free him from his bonds. I land the boat on the island, secure it to a stone, and rush to the gull. I gently gather the bird, slowly untangling, untangling, untangling: the white silkiness of this awesome creature, the gentle, strong, yellow feet, a life-giving blue-grey across his back, the same color as the water so as to blend in, so the hawks above don't decide on this particular gull for a quick meal. Watch out. His bill is sharp. His jaw is strong. He can bite with a quickness and power that leave my soft, vulnerable fingers open to a nasty nip. I look into his eyes, yellow, like the afternoon sun, with a sun spot, a black mystery in the center. A red ring circles the yellow eye with the black pupil. Such eyes, such deep and knowing eyes.

I killed that bird. I tried to snap his neck but it was too flexible so I pinned his head to the ground and smashed his skull with a stone.

From his struggle in the Tern's safety net, his wing had broken. Being hollow, bird's bones don't heal like people's. And I knew he would never fly again. I considered taking him to the vet but gulls weren't prized show animals like hawks and owls. I knew he would be put down. I considered setting him free but in his condition, he would soon starve to death. So, I killed him.

Grief is not the word for how I felt. I knew that I had put the fishing line up on that island. And it was that fishing line that broke that bird's wing. And with those soft, vulnerable fingers of mine, I finished the job and ended his life. Grief is definitely not the word. I felt the suffering of that creature in my hands. And I still do.

And that experience has stayed with me since that time as I feel a connection with gulls in a way that I hadn't before. Because, in addition to the grief, I also felt the power of honesty. If I did anything of value for that creature, I at least did not run from what was to happen. I did not abandon him to the slow and painful death of starvation or

pass him off to be killed by another. I looked. If I did anything at least I looked. And that looking evoked in me a love so deep. Yes, a love. And now, every time I see gulls flying overhead, not only do I remember the pain, but I feel awe and I feel love. Those eyes, I will never forget those eyes, that bird's eye view.

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Birds remind us so much of our longing to rise above it all, to feel free and safe, unencumbered by the weightiness of life. And yet, as the fullness of a bird lies not merely in its wings, the fullness of the human spirit lies not merely in our ability to rise above and fly without bound. Much spiritual philosophy tells us that if we are spiritual enough, disease, suffering, loss will all be in the past. Yet, the wisest of spiritual counsel differs from this view.

To live in this world means that we will all have to face loss, we will have to face pain, we will have to face death. To live in this world means that eventually for all of us, our wings will break. Eventually for all of us, our wings will break.

When I was a boy dreaming about flying free from the hold of gravity, I was concurrently dreaming about genocide, utter violence, the nightmare of nuclear holocaust. Upon reflection on those dreams and that time in my life, my interstellar travel was not only my interior expression of peace, quietness, and freedom but my defense mechanism protecting me from the pain that was the threat of world destruction and the fear of my own death. And that protection had value for me, as

sometimes it is necessary for us to step back, rest, and recover. But it is far too easy for a momentary need to become a lifelong habit.

These internal escape mechanisms, these flights of freedom (some of which all of us have) not only protect us from pain but they shield us from our world. They dull our senses and we grow numb silencing the fullness that is our divine humanity. We disconnect. And in this disconnection, in the depths of our fear, in our flight, we may find ourselves missing all the beauty, all the glory, all the love that life has to offer. In exchange for safety, we might miss that bird's eye view.

That wonderful, wounded gull bequeaths to us a lesson, a deeper meaning of the word transcendence, a transcendence of feeling-less-ness, a rising above of numbness. This bird calls us, all of us, to face the broken wings of the world and say, "I see you. I hear you. I feel you." To live life with a deep form of radical presence, with a love that blossoms in the depths of immanence, intimacy and connection.

And as we open ourselves to the world, to both its comforts and its challenges, we open ourselves up to the fullness that is Life, to the connection that is the divine experience. We open ourselves up to that which exists in the midst of both joy and sorrow, that which many of us call, Love.

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