

Taking Flight

Danny was a four-year-old who loved exploring his backyard. One day he discovered a small blue egg, and took it into the house to show his mother. “What’s this?” he asked. “It’s a robin’s egg. You should put it back in the nest where you found it.” “But it was on the ground,” replied Danny. “Then we’ll go out and look for it so the mother bird won’t be upset.” They located the nest in a small tree and replaced it; there were two other eggs inside.

For the next several weeks Danny watched the nest closely. One day he heard chirping sounds, and a flurry of activity from the parents bringing food for the just-hatched chicks. Danny so much wanted to look in the nest, but his mother cautioned that this would upset the parent robins who were busy raising their young. In time, the little birds perched on the edge of the nest and flapped their wings, preparing for flight. It wasn’t long after that the family left the nest to continue their lives elsewhere. But Danny’s fascination with every stage of their development set the stage for a life-long interest in birds. Today as an adult, Dan keeps a book of North American birds and a pair of binoculars handy as he watches the many feathered visitors to his acreage.

As the theme of the May retreat I attended at Ancient Spirals near Saskatoon, “Taking Flight” looked at the lives of four birds. Although quite different in habits and food sources, all have lessons that can enrich our Christian lives with examples of compassionate social behavior, loyalty and strength, longevity and bonding, and tireless endurance. Let’s look at each one and compare their unique traits and abilities with those we need to be developing.

1) Magpie

A member of the *corvid* family that includes crows, jays and ravens, these are scavenger birds whose diet can include almost anything from insects, seeds, berries, and nuts to carrion and garbage. As such, they’ve had a distasteful reputation as a nuisance bird, yet their social behavior

is remarkable. They form loose flocks that acknowledge each other, especially when a death occurs. They gather around the carcass and perform a strange type of “funeral”, communicating compassionately through sound and movement that one of them is gone.

Magpies are curious and intuitive in stockpiling food supplies in ‘caches’ that they dig in the earth or snow with their bills, later to return and retrieve what they covered with twigs or leaves to conceal. That’s because theft often happens within their numbers, as it does with other food sources like access to an animal carcass or nest of birds’ eggs. Yet, these birds can live about 4-6 years if left undisturbed in the wild. Native people often looked with favor on the magpie, as they helped the buffalo stay clean of ticks and fleas. Cattle, which replaced the bison on the western ranges, reacted differently to the presence of these birds, and from this came the dark reputation of the corvid family in general. But their place in nature is still important.

Christians can also benefit from their social interaction with others in the faith community: sharing the joys and sorrows of every day that includes honoring those who have passed; safeguarding their supply of food, both physical and spiritual; helping others live a better life; recognizing that behaviors that disturb the peace of the group can happen and need to be addressed. Magpies are one of the few species that seem to be self-aware as individual birds. We, as humans, are also self-aware and can set our own course as individuals. But joined together in the church, we know we’re accountable to each other as we live and work together.

Mrs. Flanihy was a pioneer wife on a prairie homestead who was puzzled with the disappearance of several valuable coins that had been sitting on the porch. Along with some bits of food, she had no idea where these had gone. That afternoon she noticed a mottle-colored egg on the ground underneath a tree, and some kind of bird’s nest above. It wasn’t too high, so she got a ladder and replaced the egg. Just then, several magpies swooped down and tried to shoo her

away with loud squawking and attempts at pecking. Yet, at the same time, they sensed that their nest was complete again, and in an unusual gesture of appreciation returned their thanks. One of them flew off and sat over a patch of ground, loudly trying to get Mrs. Flanihy's attention.

Curious, she went over to where the bird was moving some branches and leaves away from a small hole in the ground. She was overjoyed to see the glint of her coins at the bottom! Somehow the magpie knew that the shiny objects that had been taken from the porch didn't belong in the hole as a source of food, and rewarded their rightful owner by returning them. After all, Mrs. Flanihy's action helped preserve the full brood of eggs in the nest. What a remarkable sense of intuitive understanding.

2) Eagle

The eagle, particularly the bald eagle as America's national bird, is a member of the family of birds of prey that include hawks, falcons and owls. They have powerful wings and leg muscles that can grip and hold sources of food in their talons. Their sharply curved beak is perfect for ripping and tearing flesh, a diet that consists entirely of fish and small animals. Having eyesight three to four times more acute than humans, they can spot prey from long distances and dive towards water or land to get it. Young eagles not as experienced at hunting also scavenge carcasses or garbage dumps for food.

The female lays only two eggs in the large nest built up in mature groves of fir or hardwood trees, the biggest of any bird. Usually only one hatchling survives, as it will be years before maturity. Their normal lifespan is around 20 years. Due to their size and strength, native peoples looked on the eagle as a sacred link between the earth and the Creator, the feathers used on clothing and in ceremonies like the Sun Dance and healing rituals to transport prayers for the sick up to the sky.

Allan was a First Nations dancer with a deep connection with the spiritual traditions of his people. The honor given to those who performed at pow wows was something he took seriously. Today at the gathering of Lakota, Dakota and Cree, smudging began the festivities, the sacred smoke of the sweetgrass wafting over his head and body fanned by an eagle feather, cleansing him and bringing peace to his spirit. He prayed for strength and endurance, vision and intelligence, freedom and loyalty to his ancestors who had given him the ability to dance.

When the drummers and singers started, he was ready and dressed in the finest beaded buckskin decorated with eagle feathers. He expressed joy in his dance steps, sadness in the pauses, and community as he joined others in the circle. His spirit soared like the bird he identified with most, thankful for the opportunity the Creator gave him to celebrate life.

3) Loon

Loons are water birds that belong to the same family as cormorants, coots and grebes. Their bulky bodies make them appear like a large duck or small goose. Having webbed feet at the back of the body means they avoid coming onto land except to nest. They also need a lot of space to take off from water – the longest ‘runway’ of any aquatic bird. They’re excellent swimmers and can dive for their food with pinpoint accuracy, mostly fish and other water-dwelling creatures. They mate for life and can live as long as 30 years. But it’s their plaintive call that sets this bird apart as the spirit of the northern lakes.

The best vacation for Holly and George is to take their canoe and paddle around a lake in northern Ontario far from the bustle and noise of urban centers. Here they can be fully absorbed into the primitive beauty of creation: water, trees, rocks and birds. They’ve always been attracted to the distinctive call of the loon and often sit quietly in their canoe in early evening, just as the sun is setting and listen. The song they hear tells much about the virtues they aspire to: soul-

partners with each other and God, vulnerability in taking off on life's challenges, ability to seek the best sources of food for the spirit whether in nature or in their community of faith back home. Feeling refreshed, they return to their cabin and look forward to a restful night in God's keeping.

4) Hummingbird

The hummingbird is unique among the creatures of air in its extremes: the fastest heartbeat (1,260 beats per minute) and breathing rate (250 breaths per minute) needed to sustain hovering and fast forward flight (80 beats per second). They must eat half their weight in nectar to fuel such energy, capable of digesting the sugars within 30 minutes. The rest of their diet is insects caught while flying (mosquitoes, fruit flies, gnats) or on leaves and branches (aphids, spiders). They can conserve energy by entering a state of torpor or hibernation at night or when food supplies are scarce. It's remarkable that they can live 3-5 years at the edge of physical limits for their species.

Elderly Daisy Hawkins looked out of her window onto a row of bird feeders. She loved to sit and watch the antics of the various birds as they came for nourishment. The most interesting one for her was the hummingbird feeder, a long tube filled with sweet water. She was often puzzled by the fierce defence of a perch one particular hummingbird showed against others of his own kind. She later learned that this territorial instinct was to make sure a future supply of food was available, as starvation would guarantee an early death for such a high metabolism. Not much different from herself, who guarded her private time with scripture, prayer and meditation each morning as such had done for years. Daisy always felt that her strength, flexibility and tireless endurance depended on keeping her source of spiritual food open and available. A good lesson for all of us.

May we take to heart the message all these birds have given. Amen.