



November 13, 2023

Birds Matter

Several years ago, our adolescent grandson sat at the dining room table with us as we admired the birds at the feeder on the deck. He asked, “So do you two pretty much watch birds all day?” It was less a question than it was an observation that generations older than his own have rather little to occupy their minds and fill their days.

The answer to our grandson’s question was no. Unlike some very knowledgeable bird watchers, we are decidedly amateurish, and we can’t identify all of the bird songs or easily distinguish between closely related species. We don’t devote a great deal of time to birds, but we do love seeing them. It’s exciting to see Eastern Bluebirds nest in the birdhouses at the back of our property, and we welcome the Baltimore Orioles and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds at the feeders on the deck. We’re thrilled if we see an Indigo Bunting or a flock of Cedar Waxwings, and we consider ourselves fortunate if a walk in the woods allows us to see a Barred Owl. In the winter, we rejoice in the beauty of a Cardinal against the snow, and we are grateful for the attentions of the nuthatch and The Tufted Titmouse.

I can’t help but recall an Emily Dickinson poem, “‘Hope’ Is the Thing with Feathers,” in which a bird is a metaphor for hope:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—
And sore must be the storm—
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm—

I've heard it in the chilliest land—
And on the strangest Sea—
Yet—never—in Extremity—
It asked a crumb—of me.

(Poetry Foundation)

The speaker doesn't need to identify the species of the bird, but the indomitable bird of hope "perches in" (not on) "the soul." The bird needs no words but comforts "so many" and not only the speaker. Most interestingly, the bird is always there but asks nothing—not even "a crumb" of food—of the speaker. It's as if we're hardwired to have hope.

Perhaps you've heard about studies within this past year that show that seeing birds or listening to them has a positive impact on our mental health. It's not exactly astounding that being in nature might be healthier than being in a congested urban environment, or that listening to bird songs might be healthier than hearing traffic noise. Many past studies, though, were somewhat limited because they asked people to report their feelings in retrospect. A study outlined in *Scientific Reports*, however, made use of a smartphone app so that study participants could report their feelings in real time. The study of 1292 people showed that interactions with birds improved the sense of mental wellbeing for both healthy and depressed people—and the effect lasted for hours. The study was able to show that it was not nature in general or "greenery" that made the difference, but rather, seeing or hearing birds in particular allowed people to feel more cheerful and optimistic (Hammoud et al). In another study, researchers found that even listening with headphones to six-minute audio recordings of bird songs reduced depression, anxiety, and paranoia in subjects who were essentially healthy (Sima).

Perhaps it would not be too much to say that birds incline us toward hope, when we can easily be burdened by our own sorrows and those of people close to us, in addition to our worries about the U.S. and the world. As responsible citizens, we feel obligated to stay informed about foreign affairs, national politics, the economy, the environment, education, immigration, race relations and prejudice, women's rights, and policies related to gun control, abortion, technology, and the separation of church and state. And we need to evaluate the reliability of our sources of information, especially with the complications of Artificial Intelligence! If you're like me, you sometimes find that it's all too much—and that there's plenty of raw material for despair. Maybe watching or listening to birds more often would be refreshing and hopeful!

The ultimate hope for us, of course, lies in our faith. Jesus said, “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of clothing?” (RSV, Matt. 6:26-27). And in Luke, we read, “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.” (RSV, Luke 12:6-7). It’s not that God lacks interest in the sparrow. God cares about even an individual, unglamorous sparrow, so how can we doubt that He cares about us? In our *Presbyterian Hymnal* (661), we read the refrain referring to these Bible verses: “I sing because I’m happy, / I sing because I’m free, / For His eye is on the sparrow, / And I know He watches me.” God values every sparrow, so we should be fundamentally hopeful in the knowledge that God knows and is attentive to our needs, too. Our Hope rests with God.

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Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version. New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1952.

Sima, Richard. “Why Birds and Their Songs Are Good for Our Mental Health.” *Washington Post*. (18 May 2023). Accessed washingtonpost.com/wellness/interactive/2023/birds-song-nature-mental-health-benefits/. 8 Nov 2023.

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