

MEDITATIONS ON CREATURES

BIRDS (Al Wilson, April 14, 1991)

I like to watch the coming and going of the birds on the bird bath and in the maple tree in the front yard. Their activities seem very much like our own, hectic, hastened and even hazardous. Superficially their flights seem random, but on closer inspection there are patterns. One of the more visible patterns is that governed by a "pecking order". This order of precedence is not always a matter of size. Some of the smaller feisty birds seem to have acquired a high rank on the pecking ladder. While the larger birds have unmistakable visible recognition as their source of status, the smaller ones are always having to remind others of their rank by chasing and other aggressive behavior. This is an example of the old Persian adage concerning two kinds of truth: truth which is so only if continually repeated (small bird truth) and truth which is visible whether or not it is ever repeated (big bird truth).

What intrigues me is why is it that birds and sometimes humans indulge in this kind of behavior, while most other grounded animals do not. Are hierarchy's peculiar to birds and to humans whenever they are ungrounded? Is this because in the three-dimensional world of birds there may be more degrees of freedom than can be coped with and surrogate restraints are necessary? Indeed, hierarchy and freedom seem to be universally antithetical. They are each anecdote to an excess of the other. If this notion also applies in the realm of the angels, we must assume they possess many dimensions of freedom since they are so tightly structured hierarchically. Or does grounding, rootedness in the earth, play a role in the presence and absence of hierarchy? The structure of the earth is more a complex net of everything being related to everything else than a chain of command hierarchy. Perhaps the basic parameter is determinism. Where there is strong determinism, there is no need of hierarchy. Where there is great choice hierarchy appears. The offspring's of choice are hierarchy, orthodoxy, heresy, and morality. When there is no choice, no freedom, there is no orthodoxy or heresy, there is no morality, and there is no need for hierarchy.

I watch birds of many sizes, colors, and markings come to bathe or drink in the birdbath. I do not know the names of these birds and consequently I cannot always be sure that a particular species of bird is new or that I just have never noted it before. Some seem vaguely familiar, but only those whose names I know, like robins and jays, can I be sure are repeat performers. Thus, in order for a bird to be really familiar to me I must know its name. Memory just doesn't seem to work on one level. It must be 'sealed' on a second level to be retained, retrieved, and recognized. There must be both the visual experience of the bird and a referent to that experience, such as a name, before the properties of memory, retrieval and recognition can be invoked. And it is this encoding of memory that affords familiarity and hence understanding.

OF SQUIRRELS AND MEN

Sometimes certain events impress themselves indelibly on our memories becoming clues to what we feel our experience on earth is really about. Such was an event that occurred some forty years ago that keeps coming to my mind making associations and raising questions. Even though it was, and still is, a very common event, one we ignore every day, this particular instance somehow struck me in the heart and made me face what we all sooner or later must face.

Returning home one afternoon after a ten day observing session at the Palomar Observatory, I was driving along a shady portion of the road when I observed up ahead two squirrels in the middle of the road. One was lying flat, evidently just recently hit by a car. The other was standing on its hind legs by the head of its dead companion, motionless, staring into the distance, totally oblivious to my approaching car. My mind was taken over by the scene. I was no longer just observing a moment of pain and tragedy, I was experiencing something that is simultaneously personal and universal.

It has been said that Man is the only creature who is both mortal and knows he is mortal. This particular piece of knowledge is a knowledge we seek refuge from all of our lives. Here, standing upright was a creature, bewildered, not sharing our fatal knowledge, incapable of understanding what had happened. "Why don't you answer my call? Why do you lie there? Why don't you move? Aren't we going back to the woods together?" And here, was this observer, also bewildered, but knowing what had happened, yet trying to digest the full import of this

*If the universe crushes him,
man would still be nobler than
the thing which destroys him,
because he knows he is
dying, and the universe which
has him at its mercy is
unaware of it.*

----Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

ubiquitous event. Whose pain is greater, those with no knowledge of death or those who carry that knowledge? Was this the real knowledge we acquired in the Garden of Eden, though it is usually called knowledge of good and evil?

In this event I saw again the pain in the countless departures not only from life, but in life. The last embraces in the bus depot, the train station, the airport, off to war, those departures that knew not whether there would ever be a return. Human suffering is not just from our desires and aversions, as a great Sage one taught, there is something implicit in our very condition, going beyond all intention, that reveals a deep unfilled well of longing in our being, maybe best phrased, "Aren't we going back to the woods together?"

When I see the stunned grief of a squirrel standing beside its dead mate on a country road; when I see an ant rescuing and carrying a companion from danger, like Orpheus escorting Eurydice from the underworld; I feel that there is a universal sense of compassion, participated in not only by humans, but extending to all sentient creatures. If, indeed, this manifestation of compassion abides in all sentient beings while the God of the universe is "neutral and unconcerned", as we are taught by a science that would metaphorically render our destiny to be the climbing to the summit of some Aztec pyramid to have our hearts, our meaning, ripped out to appease its neutrality and objectivity, then it is up to us to take over the universe from this indifferent God and replace him with Compassion, Concern, and Love. It is out of these that we must make God.

Yesterday I was much upset that a squirrel suddenly dashed in front of our car and there was no way I could avoid hitting it. Today I am on foot. I stopped to watch with admiration the skillful and safe crossing of the street by another squirrel maneuvering on a thin cable with exquisite balance. On reaching a tree on the far side, the squirrel scrambled up a complex but familiar path, reaching a second cable and continuing across another street.

With more trees being cut down and trimmed back, squirrels are forced more frequently to cross streets on the ground. But squirrel wisdom is not ground wisdom. They are skilled and adept in their medium above the earth, hopelessly vulnerable elsewhere. We humans seem to be the same, and as our environment changes, we are forced to spend more and more time in situations in which we are increasingly vulnerable. We are not gods, we have lost sight of where we belong and at what we are skilled.. Humans on foot and humans behind the wheels of cars are really two distinct species. We have restructured our cities for the wheel species, so both old fashion humans and squirrels will soon be without a home.