

Just a Sparrow:

“Chauncey, old man, long time no see.” As I have come to expect, my good friend went on about his business unmindful of my, or any, intrusion. You don’t just walk up to Chauncey Griggs and divert him from his present intention. It’s not that easy. Instead, the process is rather like coaxing a sporting dog from her mission. Once pointed the dog is reluctant to change her perspective, hesitant to step out of character for just any interruption. Chauncey is likewise focused, always pointing.

The subject of his focus can be excruciatingly narrow as in his prolonged study of the role that messengers play in the works of Shakespeare. Apparently he was inspired by Tom Stoppard years ago and hasn’t looked back since. He can recite lines from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as easily as you and I quote the Banner. On the other hand, his attention can be drawn by the broadest of concerns. Witness his collection of all things made of string. His exhibits range from a spool of thread from County Cork, Ireland to a full sized replica of the ironclad Merrimack which he crafted as part of his Senior Project back in ’57. The Civil War in general is an interest of Chauncey’s. The Civil War in string is a passion. Stone Mountain entwined must be seen to be believed. String Shiloh is breathtaking.

But on this day, as I encountered Mr. Griggs on our mutual gravel road, his concern was neither the Bard nor string, it was the birds. It is May in our woods and May brings the full panoply of avian abundance. May is the time when the least attentive observer might see a dozen species in five minutes. It is a time when one’s senses are rocked by red and blue and orange and black on the wing. If the birds didn’t move and sing you’d swear they were ornamental. He was admiring our feeders which were clogged at the time with a dozen Grosbeaks, young and old, male and female, returning veterans and fresh fledges. “Hat’s off to you and the Angels, Saunders. I know it’s not inexpensive to feed this ravenous mob but it has its rewards, no?” Yes.

At the risk of an interminable answer I asked Chauncey what his favorite might be. I was aware that he might expound until dark about his preferences but his opinions are almost always worth my time and often downright enlightening. He responded by asking me if I was aware that the feathers of the Indigo Bunting were brown and not blue, that the blue appearance of the bird was due to the way that light reflected off the creature’s feathers. I said I was aware of that.

He then asked me if I knew about the residential rudeness of Cowbirds, about how they made ready use of the nests of other songbirds to the detriment of the host birds' progeny. I said that I did indeed. He asked me if I had ever seen the supremely intelligent Crow stalk and destroy the eggs of a neighboring Robin and then go on to repel the ensuing attack of the Red Tail Hawk on her own nest. I have witnessed just such behavior.

He went on for quite some time regarding the finer points of various species, testing me with questions of ornithological minutiae. Finally, he said the House Sparrow was his favorite of them all. He didn't hesitate. He didn't qualify. The ubiquitous House Sparrow was his choice. "Why on earth, my friend, would you choose the commonest of all the birds that we see. How is it that you prefer this brownish chatterbox to all the other more colorful, tuneful dwellers of our forest? What is it about this noisy, aggressive commoner that attracts you?"

Chauncey hesitated for a moment and scratched the ground with the toe of his boot. He looked at me and then away from me and said, "That little bird has no secrets. I guess I don't like being fooled." I waited. "That sparrow chirping in your brush pile is here through every season, never ever misses a day, and is always brave whether it's us or a Hawk that gets too close." My friend was beginning to get the look of a man talking from his heart but not about birds. I'm not sure what image was playing in his mind. I had never seen him like this. Was he picturing his mother or a teacher or himself or me? I still don't know and with a private man like Chauncey you don't ask. Finally he said, "That little sparrow is a bird you can trust. He's just a sparrow."

I'm still thinking about it, about my chat with Chauncey. There are so many circumstances that I, we face all the time. There are so many temptations to be indirect rather than straightforward, to be angling for something other than what we've stated. Then it occurred to me that Chauncey was putting it out there, the idea that direct and plain is the way to live. In Chauncey's eyes it is noble indeed to live like a sparrow.