

And So It Goes:

Every time I sit down to write, before ideas form, before my preachy self takes hold, I look through the huge windows of this castle and I see the birds. This week, today in particular, is a marvelous time to be doing just that. The yard and the gardens and the woods are full of fledglings. There have been so many hatches this year, so many broods. Makes us proud.

Red bellies and finches and blue jays and sparrows and grosbeaks and doves and downies and titmice are all learning the ins and outs of doing for themselves. It's a good thing they don't have our human sense of embarrassment, our humiliation at doing things clumsily or just flat out wrong. It's a good thing because they are simply ridiculous in their efforts. It's a dance-comedy on a par with kittens and puppies.

I'm watching a very young woodpecker who hasn't figured out yet that he can perch close to the portals of the feeder. He is standing at 'arm's length', attached sideways to the post, stretching for all he is worth to reach his morsels of sunflower. He just got the idea to feed himself today after pestering the adults who produced him over the past weeks to feed, feed, feed and feed him. Adult birds are saints. Their putting up with the constant pestering and pecking and whining and ingratitude of their chicks is truly admirable. Come to think of it, adults of any species are saints. We've all put up with it, haven't we?

I'm watching young finches (I think they will turn out to be purple finches) flutter and bounce around the feeders. They are practicing landings. They practice at the feeders. They practice on the nearby trees. They practice at the brush piles. They are tireless. Their energy is boundless. They are my heroes.

Of course, it's easy to ascribe human values and characteristics to them. It's natural to compare them to ourselves in completely unreasonable ways. That's what humans do. I know and you know that what they are doing is learning the basic skills for survival. Eat, fly, land, mate, nurture and rest. I like the rest part especially. I get tired just watching them.

Did you know that, on an average, songbirds maintain a body temperature of 107 degrees Fahrenheit? They do this when it's eighty-five outside and they do this when it's twenty-five below. It's no wonder they are a study in motion.

There's a comfort in knowing that the same birds, given seasonal adjustments, will be at the feeders month after month, year in and year out. The ones that migrate find their way back. (Oh yes, while I think about it, rent the film "Winged Migration" and watch it with your family). Birds must have been the models for all the great navigators from the Polynesians to the Portuguese. I believe Magellan must have been a reincarnated Albatross. How else do you account for his circling the globe only to be killed and eaten by the last set of islanders that he "discovered"? Great skills, really bad luck.

There is a lovely truth in the repetition of the inevitable. It has always been and it always will be that life goes on. Until it doesn't. Oddly enough, even the awesome prowess of our local hawks recalls for us the surety of this continuum. They eat at our feeders in their own way, with their unique feed, songbirds. It's appropriate somehow that the end of life, in the talons of a sharp shinned hawk, is as fitting as a finch learning to feed itself. There is a food chain. Everything eats. In the dead of winter last year we watched the same young hawk miss on nineteen consecutive passes at the birds on the feeders.

I never thought I would feel sorry for the raptor. Now I understand. It's not a trivial matter eating something that doesn't want to be eaten. Road kill has its place.

I'm looking at five, no six, fledged cardinals. They are staring at the ground trying their best to distinguish food from soil. It's not easy for them. One bird focused for fully 20 seconds before she tried a peck at her target. A piece of seed that went down nicely, thank you. Next try ten seconds. Next try five. And then it's all so easy, like she's been doing it for years.

The new sparrows are immediately as gregarious as they will be throughout their lives. They do everything together. Their practice flights are a serious game of follow the leader. From brush pile to feeder to dogwood to feeder to brush pile is a flight of about 90 feet total. When they land at home base they commence to yell. I think they're telling each other what a thrill it is. I think they compare stories of near misses and emergency landings. I think they dare each other to do it again.

Before you know it the young will be indistinguishable from the old. They'll be chased to new territory. They'll fall prey to the predator. They'll become adults feeding broods of their own. They'll leave the roost one morning and not come back that night. They'll sing to the dawn in another valley. Maybe your valley.

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