



Look at the Birds

By Dan Siemens

It is springtime. I rise early as if racing the dawn to travel where deep within the blossoming birch and newly-leafing poplar, melodious song is already spontaneously erupting. It comes now in spurts, here and there, in scattered staccatos as if eager to test the tensile strength of the pre-dawn glow. A chorus, like a restless ocean, heaves, rises and falls, but swells in strength and number with every increasing ray of light. The prelude is almost over; the concert to begin.

A sudden remembrance of prose from St. Francis of Assisi drifts through my mind and I reverently whisper the verse ever so softly on my lips:

Sunrise,
In the morning.
And all creation greets the dawn,
To praise the Lord,
Who has created

Brother Sun
To open our eyes.
Or all of us would be blind
If not for the Light of our Lord.

Now the sun, shyly emerging on the horizon, is greeted by the full burst of sound—a cacophonous feast for the ears. Music that has been miraculously scored and handed down from generations past is now unashamedly and generously offered and strewn from above like confetti drifting downward from every branch. Where do my enfeebled ears even begin to listen?

Submerged between these layers of bird-song, it is simultaneously painful and also obvious to

me that I am only a foreigner swimming here in this world of liquid avian melody. I attempt to stand perfectly still to compensate. I want to belong here—to somehow take my place within this primordial dawn. I must at least offer some gesture in order to be truly present to this immediate beauty, groping to find the switch to turn off the modern filters with which my ears have been so dutifully trained. Something deep within aches to be wide-open, wildly absorbent, totally aware, taking in the pure immediacy of every song, completely present to the moment so as not to waste a single note of God's extravagant gift.

While I have always been drawn to the solitude and wonder of nature, I have not been a bird watcher very long. And I am not as serious of a "birder" as some who compile life-lists of birds sighted and carry around expensive viewing equipment, or the latest electronic gadget, that can tell them, even when they are in the field, where a rare sighting has just been made...and off they go.

Over the years, I've also noted that the way I related to the natural world as a young adult is very different than how it is now. In my youth, I often ventured forth into the wild for a very different purpose: I went to label, tag and bag, claim and tame in what was a backhanded attempt to conquer something. Consciously or unconsciously, nature, whether flora, fauna, or mountain peak, was something to pit against myself in order to test my own mettle. Ultimately, it was something to "subdue" to which I could testify in order to bolster my own sagging prowess.

The years have altered my perspective. Spiritually, the developmental task of one in his mid-fifties is radically different than the heroic, grand gestures of attainment sought in earlier years. As time passes, the veneer of being strong gives way to the undeniable vulnerability of weakness, sometimes radical helplessness, where one must learn to embrace the seasons of life that offer us the rich, but often painful, lessons of paradox. So, that which was once quick, agile, and fast begins to slow. The passage of days, and of time itself, is experienced within a different color and hue.

Watching birds, or being in nature for any extended period of time, is something you must learn to do by being out in the middle of it. If you want to discover



how to be in the woods, then you have to “be in the woods”; you must spend ample time there. You must acclimatize to a new “time zone” called “natural time.” It requires something akin to making oneself slow and yet slower still—a kind of stillness and deepening patience that is required as if one were to sit and watch ice melt, one drop at a time, on a frozen river during the spring thaw.

This slowing and stilling process is one of many of God's gifts we can receive through the natural world. In it, we can experience a new kind of awareness some have called the *power of slowing*. Can you think of anything more needful than such a power when contrasted with the frantic pace of our modern world—a pace that often borders on neuroses, a pace often residing even within the church? This kind of busyness has been referred to as the scourge of our age because it robs us of something precious from our very souls.

I have discovered that this *power of slowing* simply resonates with the inner cadence of my spirit at this season in my life. It is teaching me how to calm my squirming soul; it is my momentary entry point back into the Garden where time has spent itself and eternity has begun. It is my consummate excuse to practice for future strolling and conversing with God in the Kingdom which will one day be present here on the new earth.

Was Jesus a birder? Maybe. He instructed us to “Look at the birds of the air...” (Matt. 6:26). But, of course, none of this is really about the birding activity itself. Like all spiritual disciplines, solitude and becoming quiet in your spirit merely places you in a kind of space where God can do his deepest work: a space where God can keep you still long enough to reach deep inside and touch your soul. It is a place that Jesus himself often sought when he wanted to be alone with his Father. It is the place of deepest communion, wordless communication, restfulness in the midst of the turbulence of life.

As summer has ended and fall has begun, when you have moments where you can venture out into God's creation, whether it's sitting on your deck or patio, or maybe fishing on your favorite lake, or walking your favorite path, allow the *power of slowing* to immerse your soul in the miracle of God's regenerative process. In the midst of the busyness of a fruitful life, it is indeed His great gift to us, and one we dare not neglect.

(Dan Siemens, along with his wife Denise, is on staff at Lutheran Renewal. He can often be found in the morning greeting Brother Sun.)