

Parent's Point of View

Birds, and Babies

By Jennifer Lutman

I don't remember all the exact details of my lab results when I pulled over to take the nurse's call, but I will never forget the sidelong glances of those three stately black crows by the shore of Cazenovia Lake. I am not an especially mystical type, but when the nurse gave me news that my pregnancy—oh thank stars, after so many heartbreaking attempts, my pregnancy—appeared to be progressing normally, I looked at those birds and felt them looking back at me. I mean, they looked at me. It seemed as though these intimidating, intelligent-eyed creatures had alighted on that rock beside my car to give me something. A message? A warning? A congratulatory nudge of encouragement? I wasn't sure, but I told my partner later that if the crows could have spoken, I was certain they'd have said, "This baby is ours; take care of it. We'll be watching."

So, of course when our baby was born (on Friday the 13th, I kid you not—but don't worry, this isn't that kind of story), we bought her pictures of crows for her walls and crow talismans and crow books, and now at 2 ½ she knows that the crow is "her bird" and we have great fun with this entertaining memory of mine and the crow's cool history and cultural symbolism. We laugh, my partner and I, knowing that I imagined them communicating to me because I needed or wanted to feel the authority and strength in their message, or perhaps because I just couldn't contain the magic of being pregnant and had to thrust it off on something nearby. We laugh, but the truth is I think about these crows all the time, and watch for them, and reflect every day on the lesson they've taught me.

The crows weren't the only birds to take part in teaching me the lesson, though. Part of its unfolding came from watching the family of starlings in our backyard the summer of our daughter's birth. We were newly home from the hospital, transitioning into the proverbially erratic and exhausting rhythm that is life with a newborn, when a brood of fledglings decided to fly—or rather, wobble-flap-fall to the ground—and then promptly follow their parents around our yard, mouths agape and small bodies frantic with need. So this is parenting, I thought, and watched them with a tired smile. Children are fragile and uncoordinated and perpetually hungry—for food, for Us and whatever we will give them when we turn in response to their sweet, insistent little beaks pecking at our backs. I shared this observation with my partner and my visiting mother, not catching the irony then that Mom had been working tirelessly for days upon the baby's arrival, baking us casseroles and doing laundry and running errands and being an unflinching mother of me in ways I doubt I'll ever be able to emulate with my own daughter. And there it is—one of the fears at the root of these bird-musings—that I won't be able to perform this mothering thing well.

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It wasn't until witnessing a very different kind of bird drama, this one involving the crows again, that I fully understood what all these winged animals had to teach me. A week or so before our daughter's first birthday, on one of those delicious Central New York June days when the high, blue sky lifts away even the most draining day's stressors, I decided to park the car at home after work and walk the two blocks to daycare so my daughter and I could stroll home together. On our way back, chatting happily with her in my arms, I rounded the corner onto our street and noticed a flurry of movement in a driveway about 40 yards ahead. At first I thought I was seeing kittens—five or six identical kittens—playing on the asphalt behind a parked car, but then I saw the mother Mallard beside them and heard her distressed squawks. In the split second before pointing out the waddly little ducklings to my daughter, I sensed that something terrible was about to happen. Taking my cue from the mother duck's movements, I looked over my right shoulder just as the crow—the impossibly large, impossibly swift and purposeful crow—swooped down under a telephone wire, snatched a duckling, then glided up to the roof of the house. I couldn't watch what I knew would happen next, and just as my tears began to well and a hard lump rose in my throat, I noticed another crow down on the ground. He must have been the first to descend. His back was turned but the up-and-down jabs of his head gave away his carnivorous, reprehensible act.

Witnessing this scene would have been difficult for anyone, I know, but it felt especially awful that day because I'd thought, however playfully, of crows as my daughter's benevolent guardians. But here they were, not benevolent, demonstrating perhaps one reason a group of crows is called a "murder," and I was forced to acknowledge their dark power. They'd seen what they wanted, they stretched their wings and focused their beaks and took it, telephone wires and parked automobiles and squawking mother ducks and women walking by with their babies be damned. I couldn't help imagining these crows as two of the same who'd given me that look by Caz Lake, which meant I had to reconcile my feelings toward them now. From this turmoil of emotion came my lesson, now in its difficult, final form. Together with the starlings and the ducks, the crows helped me understand that although my job is to nourish and protect my baby, no matter how hard I love her and no matter how I work to keep her from harm and heartbreak, there are dangers I will not be able to protect her from. I have heard this truth of parenthood voiced to the point of cliché, but it was as if, almost two years after telling me, "She's ours; take care of her," the crows wanted to make sure I really heard it. They wanted me to know—and notice here that I've stopped saying that I "imagined" them speaking to me—that our own baby duck belongs to the cycle of life and loss, and that as quickly as she arrived to us she can be taken, and that this possibility of loss is something we stepped into the minute we made her.

The birds' lesson resonates for me with a story my mother loves to repeat. She often tells of how, when she brought me home from the hospital, she exclaimed proudly to her grandmother, "Nana, look at my baby!" Her Nana, in a tone of mild admonishment, replied, "Oh sweetheart, that's not your baby. You're

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only borrowing her for a while.” I have always understood my great grandmother’s comment to mean that babies are their own people, and that we should recognize them as such the minute they’re born. I still believe this is what Nana meant, and I take it to heart and try to apply it in my parenting, but now I hear another meaning in her comment, too. Time with our children is borrowed because they—and we—“belong” to something else, something larger, beyond our control.

I understand this, and yet I hold our girl tighter than ever. Which is, perhaps, exactly what the crows have always wanted me to do.