

The Inspiration of Rocket Robin

Lori Monson

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

5 September 2011

Readings “I’ve Learned”

I’ve learned that some of the best classrooms in the world are not classrooms at all.

I’ve learned that helping someone else helps me just as much.

I’ve learned that money doesn’t buy class or greatness.

I’ve learned that it’s those small daily happenings that make life so spectacular.

I’ve learned that everyone we meet deserves to be greeted respectfully.

I’ve learned that under everyone’s hard shell, or tattered coat,

is someone who wants to be appreciated and loved.

I’ve learned that choosing to love, knowing that I might ultimately lose my beloved, is worth it.

St. Francis wrote:

Not to hurt our humble brethren (the animals)

Is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough.

We have a higher mission:

To be of service to them whenever they require it.

Sermon: “The Inspiration of Rocket Robin”

Some of you are probably familiar with the song Ode to Billy Joe by Bobby Gentry. It starts...”It was the 3rd of June, another sleepy dusty delta day. I was out chopping cotton and my brother was bailing hay.”

Today's story starts similarly. It goes like this, "It was the 29th of June, another day about like the last. I was out on the back deck trying to prepare for my class."

Indeed, on June 29th I was sitting out on our deck, earnestly preparing for my first seminary class, which would occur in less than two weeks. So earnest was I in my efforts that when I heard our 10 year old son Nathan exclaiming repeatedly about a baby bird, I decidedly tuned him out and tried to continue to review my readings.

Didn't this child realize that I had important learning to do?

Finally, after about 5 separate excited invitations for me to come and see this bird, I reluctantly went around to the front of our house. There on the sidewalk was a little baby bird, which was half bald and seriously pathetic looking. Clearly this baby had no business being out of its nest.

My first thought was, "Great, now I have a bird to contend with."

My second thought was, "Surely I can make short order of this situation by plopping this little creature back where he belongs, so I can get back to my studies."

So I lugged over our extension ladder, plopped it against the tree limb by the nest directly above, and upon ascending the ladder, I was astonished to discover three other baby birds in the nest. These babies, however, were more developed, and my immediate assumption was that the fallen bird had hatched later, and was the weakling who wasn't able to establish its place in an already full nest.

This bird could not be returned to its nest. It would surely fall again, and next time probably wouldn't be so lucky to remain uninjured. We would have to deal with this baby bird.

You've heard how the early bird gets the worm? In this case the scrawny bird gets the humans.

As darkness was setting in, we made a makeshift nest from a shoe box. By nightfall we thought we were set for the night.

However, around 10:00pm the little bird began gaping for food again, and we had no worms. You'd have thought a fire alarm went off.

A flurry of activity ensued, and moments later Nathan and I, complete with head lamp, flashlights, and shovels, were bolting down the street, giggling gleefully and yet most determined. This was the first of numerous worming missions we would go on.

Thus began our 10-day odyssey of care and connection with this little bird, who we came to find out was a robin. We named him Rocket, in hopes that one day he too would go slicing through the air.

Our Rocket Robin.

Early the next day, on a wild baby bird rescue website, we found Dr. Terri Miller-Simms in Oklahoma, who offered me the blessed news that baby birds only have to be fed every 45 minutes DURING DAYTIME HOURS, and provided many other tidbits of baby bird care, without which I'm sure our young feathered friend would not have fared as well.

So the next handful of days passed, with us feeding Rocket and giving him opportunities to develop perching, pecking and flying skills. Though we soon fell in love with him, there was never a question about ultimately releasing him back to the wild. It was just a matter of timing.

On Day 10 I was preparing to leave for Chicago the next day to take this first theological class. In my delusion that I was the only person who could possibly provide adequate for Rocket, I was plenty concerned about leaving his care for a full week to others.

Therefore, Nathan and Maddie and I went shopping to get Rocket a proper bird cage, and as well as more worms than any suburban refrigerator should ever hold. Wax worms, butter worms, meal worms, earth worms....mmm mmm.

As we were rounding the corner onto our street after our Rocket shopping excursion, there in the middle of the street is my spouse Candice, moving in a way I've never seen her move. It looked something like this....**(give demo)**. It resembled a cross between exuberant conducting and interpretive dancing.

She was excitedly hurrying us to come see....Rocket and HIS MOTHER were in the next door neighbor's front yard!!!

After 10 days of no contact, Mama Robin had found her little one. While we were out shopping Candice had placed Rocket in this cat carrier on a walkout balcony [SHOW CARRIER].

She heard some activity on the balcony, and looked out to see an adult robin, worm in mouth, trying to get to Rocket.

Candice immediately let Rocket out of the carrier, and a beautiful reunion ensued. In her retelling of what occurred, Candice declared it to be a miracle.

For hours Mama Robin flew back and forth, always bringing her little one food. Rocket, who could fly a bit by then, would flutter from one place to another around our house, waiting for his mom to return.

She always did.

We all knew that his time for release had come, now that his mom was there to take care of him. We didn't attempt to bring him in that night.

It was the last time to date that we saw Rocket.

Releasing Rocket go was sad for all of us, and hardest of all on Nathan. He said, dead serious and through tears, "They grow up so fast. Only 10 days!!"

Knowing those were his last minutes with Rocket, Nathan pulled out the video camera, and while wobbly filming, tearfully kept repeating, "If you love something, you must set it free. Be free Rocket, be free."

Many lessons were learned by all of us through our experience with Rocket.

Nathan, who is adopted, learned a lesson of a lifetime. Like his biological mother, he came to know firsthand what it means to love so deeply that you release your loved one to the care of another and thus to a better life, even though you could have selfishly chosen to hold on.

Other lessons were learned as well.

My children became mothers. Candice became a proclaimer of miracles, and a dancer. Rocket became a teacher, and I certainly became a student, but in a most unexpected way.

A few days after Rocket flew the coop, our coop, I contacted the baby bird rescuer Dr. Miller-Simms, told her of Rocket's touching reunion with his mother, and asked if she thought that was REALLY Rocket's mom.

Dr. Miller-Simms' response was in the form of her own story of baby birds falling out of their nest and being found by mama.

She explained that several baby wrens fell out of their nest twice, so she took the babies to an entirely different part of the property, and placed them in a room with a screened window.

Before long mama wren appeared at the screen, food in beak, determined to get to her babies. The screen was opened and the mother wren cared for her babies until they could be released.

Upon hearing the story of Rocket's mom's return AND the wren story, one could say, "It's instinct, a dime a dozen. Probably happens all the time. Hardly miraculous."

A dictionary I consulted offered these definitions for the word "miracle":

An extraordinary event in the natural world, an event considered as a work of God, a wonder, a marvel.

Nowhere in the definitions were the words rare, extravagant, or spectacular used.

We live in a sensation-seeking culture. If things aren't big, and flashy and different, then they're not noteworthy, and certainly not *miraculous*.

Not only do things have to be that sensational to get our attention, but a vast majority of us are distracted with vast to-do lists.

Maria Rilke states that "We strain against the deadening grip of daily necessity." (repeat)

And perhaps, if enough time passes, we give up straining against it, and simply succumb to this subtle but deadening grip of the daily grind.

And thus, these incredible opportunities are often passed by, remaining unnoticed.

Or, perhaps we do momentarily see the fallen birds/those in need that happen along our path, but quickly dismiss any consideration to help because it simply isn't convenient.

We like things orderly, safe, known, clean. Of course there's a place for this.

But do we allow sterility to creep into our hearts to the point that it interferes with our willingness to be present to people and creatures and circumstances that might not be as, say, "clean" as we would like?

Maybe it's a baby robin, complete with wings and germs, and claws, poop and more germs.

Or maybe it's someone on the street, with a cup placed in front of them, barely making eye contact, asking for our help. It may not be claws and wings and bird germs, but do we allow smudged faces, unwashed hair, or disheveled not-so-fresh clothes to get in the way of having even a moment or two of connection with them?

I think we are wired for connectedness. That's why stories like Beauty and the Beast appeal to us. In that story, the prince is unkind to a needy woman, and with her magic powers this woman turns him into a beast until someone loves him.

We all quickly recognize the folly in the prince's initial unkindness, and we all pull for someone to fall in love the seemingly uncouth, undesirable beast.

And we love real life stories like this, like that of St. Francis of Assisi. He loved the poor, and adored nature and all creatures, no matter how germy.

At first people thought he was a lunatic, but then they recognized the goodness in his concern for the less fortunate, and they admired his love of animals. They saw, and we see, holiness in him, because he saw holiness in the poor and in the lowly creatures.

But in real life often times this all seems naïve, unrefined, even crude. And if we do embrace loving in this simple and pure way, we risk being ridiculed for it.

I was.

Shortly after Rocket's mom had come, I was at a gathering and saw a baby, smiling at her cooing mother.

Later I commented to a friend that, even though it might sound weird, this baby reminded me of Rocket. She responded, "Uh, yeah, that IS weird."

At first I felt foolish for having said anything, and regretted offering a remark about something that brought me joy, only to have it scoffed at.

Bernard Meland said that the opposite of joy isn't sorrow, but is cynicism. I decided that I wasn't going to let my joy be diminished by her cynical remark.

AND upon further reflection, I decided that the comparison wasn't so outlandish. Listen to these descriptors and tell me if you can distinguish which young one, the baby or the bird, I'm referring to:

High maintenance - eats frequently, and poops A LOT. But in addition to these inconveniences...an awe inspiring bond exists between mother and offspring, the young one is perfectly pure, has wonderful and utter dependence on others, and becomes unabashedly excited when we walk in the room.

Can you tell which I speak of? In many ways there is very little difference.

How often do we appreciate our sameness to creatures in nature, and our sameness to the less fortunate?

Numerous times throughout our Rocket experience people would comment on how fortunate Rocket was because we helped him. I wanted to say, "WE also gained so much from this!"

We, as the helpers of this pathetic scrawny bird, were equally fortunate.

A couple of weeks ago Shawn talked with us about dignity. Indeed, we live privileged and "dignified" lives with a fair amount of "fortune."

Depending on the lens we chose to use in life, we can convince ourselves that because of these advantages we've arrived, we made it, we're somebody.

My Dad once said that the primary benefit that comes with having money is having choices.

So, what do we choose to do with the resources we have?

Do we see them as avenues to further separate/elevate ourselves from “them?”

Joseph Campbell writes, *“The separateness apparent in the world is secondary. Beyond the world of opposites is an unseen, but experienced, unity and identity in us all.”*

Do we use our advantages as opportunities to foster unity?

Do we appreciate that when we assist and join with “them”, THAT’S when we’ve arrived! When we become people who serve others, when we work to eliminate barriers, that’s when we find greatness.

It’s a wonderful paradox...in order to be big we must become small...in order to be great we must embrace and join with all, including the “lowly.”

It’s then that we more easily see ourselves in that person on the street. And we can then see the same lovability in un-domesticated animals that we recognize in our own beloved pets.

When we do, we experience the reality of Universal Oneness and, as our UU principle underscores, our interdependence in the web of all existence, becomes not only known, but felt and lived.

A week from now is the 10 year anniversary of the tragedy of Sept. 11. In remembering those sobering events, some will emphasize the evil that is in the world and the misery that results. And they’re right.

The harsh reality is that buildings and the people in them have fallen from the sky. But there are also little birds falling from the sky, ready to remind us of the perfection, beauty and purity that also exist in the world.

So, after Rocket departed with his mom, I attended that seminary class that I had been preparing for. The class was called “Pragmatism and Theology.”

I appreciate the irony in this...I had been preparing quite pragmatically to begin my journey toward ministry.

But my inspiration didn’t come from these pragmatic efforts to learn. It came from the interruption to my studies that I didn’t think I had time for.

Little did I know that a half bald baby robin would take me under his wing to remind me of the importance of continuing my journey in becoming a living theology.

I’m reminded of Heather McHugh’s sentiments. She says:

“We run our clocks on wheels, our trains on time. But all the while we want to love each other endlessly- not only for a hundred years, not only six feet up and down. We want the suns and moons of silver in ourselves, not only counted coins in a cup. Thus is the whole idea of love and the notion of God.”

As Unitarians, we have our own unique way of approaching theology and the ‘notion of God.’

We all tend to have our own personal theologies, and find divinity in a myriad of ways.

For me, a bit of divinity came falling down from a nest and landed on our sidewalk on that 29th of June. I wasn’t looking for it, it just came. In fact, I was looking decidedly in the *other* direction.

But it came nonetheless.

Perhaps that’s how most miracles are supposed to be. Quiet, unassuming yet inviting, promising to make our lives more fulfilled, if we’ll just notice, if we’ll just say yes.

It might help if we were less inclined toward the spectacular and pragmatic, and more drawn to super *NATURAL* marvels.

There are plenty among us who are interested in debating miracle issues, such as, if ‘major’ miracles were actually miraculous.

For example, one debate I’ve heard is...Was the Virgin Mary REALLY a virgin mother?

I don’t know.

But I do know about another mother, who against all odds, found her baby in captivity after he had been missing in action for 10 days.

I also know that “every day” miracles are indeed miraculous, and are reminders that our world is full of sacredness and divinity and wonder.

And thus...

May our gait be slowed, to allow space for these sacred wonders.

May our gaze not always only be forward and pragmatically determined. May it also be upward to the sky, and downward to the earth, and inward to ourselves, and outward to others.

Who knows, there just might be a little Robin dropping in on us.