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Photo by author



# WOODY

by Paul B. Wiener  
Lake Grove, New York

*EDITOR'S PROLOGUE: From the dim prehistory of the human race to this very hour, certain people have had special communion with certain animals. To one degree or another, I believe, we have all had such experiences.*

*The following column is about the relationship between a man and a parrot. It reflects the philosophical, introspective musings and intimate thoughts that many of us have had but have not expressed. Whatever your personal interest in parrots may be, read on. Your spirit will be expanded and warmed by the relationship between the writer and the conure "Woody."*

## Part I

It is time dog, horse and cat lovers stopped monopolizing the books and columns devoted to rhapsodizing about pets. If there is no shortage of hyperbole about birds and the cult of birdwatching, I've yet to see anyone writing about man and parrot. And so I'd like to say a few words about my bird. While the companionship, laughter and affection parrots bring may come as no surprise to their owners—and are benefits usually ignored, if not denied, by bird environmentalists—I suspect there are

thousands of parrot lovers hungry for a few words about the object of their devotion. Call my object Woody.

Actually my parrot is a blue-crowned conure. With his pink feet, white-ringed black eyes, pink upper bill, and a body of rich, apple-green feathers fourteen inches long from turquoise head to rust-streaked tail, he is just the right stroking size for small hands like my wife's and mine. We must have looked at thirty birds before we bought Woody—parrots, lovebirds, cockatiels, mynahs, other conures. Money was a consideration, but there were many we could afford, and untouchable macaws and toucans to dream about. Not until Woody, though, did we sense the kindred spirit we were looking for. Sitting in a cage in a dark corner of the shop, looking self-conscious and vaguely lost, with bare pink spots where late-moulting feathers had yet to grow, he acted uncomfortable, shy and oddly self-possessed. I knew the feeling.

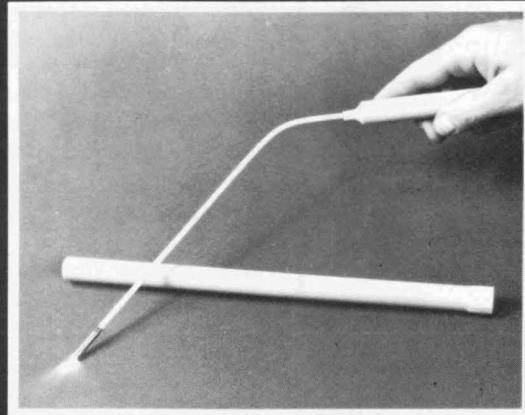
It was his smile that attracted me. I had always liked the way some parrots were smilers, and here it was, unmistakably, a satisfied smile. I know, there are people who say that birds don't smile, can't smile, and that what looks like a smile is only the accidental upward

curve of the line formed where the lower bill meets the scoop of the upper. We parrot lovers know better. You might as well say that people don't smile either: it's only the way the ends of the lips are pulled taut and high whenever something causes the cheek muscles to contract. But I have proof that Woody smiles. I've seen him many times when he wasn't smiling: when he's hungry and I've been forgetful, when we wake him up coming home late at night, when he's hard at work on a piece of wood, when all he wants is for me to leave him alone. And so I learned that to get him to smile I had to let him be himself.

Then there is the way we named him. There probably wasn't anything original about deciding to wait a while for a name to suggest itself, as the bird slowly reoriented itself to a new home, began to relax into himself and gradually assert his most peculiar and typical personal habits; from these a name would emerge. Probably a good many children would be better off named this way too, instead of having to live up to their names, or live them down, or in adolescence or maturity get nicknames based only on behaviors acquired *in extremis*. And after only a few weeks we fastened on a very common parrot behavior, a love of intensely tearing and chewing perfectly sound sticks, dowels, broom handles and molding to piles of yellow shavings, as the sponsor of his name. The name had other important connotations as well, if one were seeking to immortalize him by it. Woody. It hinted of Woody Allen, whose daffy neuroses might well appear in any denizen of our household; and it reminded of one W. Woodpecker, my favorite philosopher after Sartre. Plus, to be fair about it, the name was unisex. Since establishing the gender of most parrots usually requires an operation, we had felt a little uneasy about addressing Woody as a male—maybe it was his nose, or his constant, barely-restrained biting of solicitous fingers that was responsible. "Woody," therefore, seemed, at least officially, to be a gesture in the direction of objectivity.

Soon after we brought him home, in our frantic desire to please his palate, we had the great good fortune to uncover in Woody an insatiable taste for dried mango slices. We had heard that parrots ate anything, but maybe that meant all parrots put together. Ours ate only dried corn kernels, sunflower seeds and packaged mango. Oh, and wood. True, my wife in her infinite patience and optimism has managed to get tiny

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fragments of fresh apple, pear, tomatoes, watermelon and dried pineapple into his mouth, but such feeding is as much a love of labor as a labor of love. In my lazy goodwill I am content to let him eat what he will: the bird knows best. No amount of coaxing him to eat dried papaya, oranges, fresh mango or canteloupe—all the same color as dried mango—has worked, and when I've tried the look he's given me has been pitiful and embarrassing. When he's not content simply to ignore on sight an offer of unappetizing food, he bites pieces off of what's offered and tosses them on the floor until there's nothing left but for him to wipe his bill clean on a smooth piece of wood. A clean bill is health, you might say.

We never made a decision about when to let Woody out of his cage. We had always known it would be as often as possible; we hadn't known how guilty we would begin to feel putting him back in. It is supposed to be bad to let a bird have the freedom to move about the house: it can fly into windows and break feathers, wings, its neck; it can foul the carpet, chew the door, knock over the lamp, get in the salad and keep you from concentrating on the evening news. No doubt if people were birds those are just the things they'd do to insult presumptuous, clumsy owners. But it may be the offer of such freedom—and the habit of not trusting a wing that once was clipped—that keeps Woody on top of his cage, and in it. Territoriality exerts far more power than my living room. Sometimes he sits on the cage just above the door, gripping the bars, looking wistfully into his feed dish and suggestively squawking. Or he perches in the high hardwood branch we've fixed atop his metal home like an antenna, and watches television. He listens to the stereo, watches us watching him (this is a watchbird), waits for food or hunger to hit, a bathing bowl to appear, works every day on a chewing project, and generally flies the coop—to the staircase, to the floor—only when he thinks he can get away with it, or when, madly flapping like Daedalus, he loses his grasp on things. As I said, I know the feeling. My imagination has often lifted me off my feet and sent me crashing.

Many non-bird people are surprised that parrots are warm to the touch, that they have a pleasant smell—like a baby, says my wife; I say like popcorn—that their breath can be good or bad or that they can be as thrilled by physical affection as any dog or cat. Most people, including parrot lovers, usually think of

parrots as talkers and, even when the birds are dumb or raucous, talk to them as if they ought to talk, and will. It took no time to discover that scratching Woody on the back of his neck made him fluff up his head feathers in a furry puff of ecstasy, or that tickling him underneath his wing where it joins the body made him lift that wing high in the air, exposing as much of the soft layer of skin as he could to the strange, exciting attention of my fingers. But having never thought of parrots as talkers—rather, I've been trying to learn *their* language, with some success—I haven't been disappointed by Woody's monolingual habits. He talks like a bird. His skills instead lie in his ability to listen and to hear, and it is his language that adds to mine. Perhaps the dictionary of parrot squawks and screeches, rhythmic calls, confidential cackles, low grumbling questions, nasal wheedling, guttural squeeks, eloquent silences and taunting croaks has yet to be written, but as uttered language it can hold its own with meows, barks, military commands, love, babytalk, Yiddish and music. And though there are signs that Woody is working on an imitation of our "hellos," I don't really urge him on; secretly I enjoy his poor pronunciation.

Some of you, I know, will object to my description of Woody, to the way I attribute affection, humor and self-consciousness to him. I'm only projecting, you'll say, some of the shameful gaps in my own character, some of the needs I have to love something small I can control. (But does Woody not project as well? J'accuse!) To this there is little defense. I may very well be projecting, and the behaviorist in me may have little cause to rejoice at the fact that after only three months Woody learned to ring the bell we put in his cage when he wanted to wake us early in the morning to let him out (thereby training us to leave his cage door open at night, after he went to sleep). But one may project mental states onto a reality that is nevertheless clearly perceived. My luck, then, to have chosen the right bird! For I have never doubted that Woody is as assertive as my state of mind, and our competition for understanding can be fierce. The bottom line is that Woody, in only a few months, taught me patience and tolerance and enabled me, finally, to talk and act like a bird when and if I choose without a fear of being ignored, ridiculed or considered anything but normal and all too human. Ask the mockingbird on my roof if I haven't been better company lately. ●