

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 II

After the first year-and-a-half Woody could not speak one word of English. He did talk more, however. Friends expressed concern that he wasn't yet communicating, and worse, that I didn't seem to care, but I dismissed their worries as just a form of special pleading 'It's Greek to me.' As far as I was concerned, Woody was not only becoming more interesting; he demanded and deserved more of my attention.

One of his favorite expressions, spoken with varying connotations of irritability, of fascination, of simple, uninhibited exclamation, was a toddler's happy noise somewhere between a "quack" and a "what!" These Anglicized equivalents of Woodyspeak also gave appropriate meaning, I felt, to what he deeply intended to convey: he meant what he said, or so he sounded. But it was the fact that he intended a meaning that pleased me, and taught me something about him, rather than the particulars of the message he was stating, which in any case he surely conceived in total isolation from the fortunes of the human race. Sharing his uniqueness vocally with me he seemed a living, companionable reminder of the distances that keep people tolerably angry all over the planet.

People got on each other's nerves all the time—it was race, it was class, it was sex, money, god, it was hair and chemistry—but they also couldn't leave each other alone—their down fall and salvation! So I viewed Woody's and my relationship—as inevitable, and a paradox. Had I started it by buying him in a store, or had he by being captured in the jungle and brought there? Or had something other than accident and

Photo by author



WOODY

by Paul B. Wiener
Lake Grove, New York

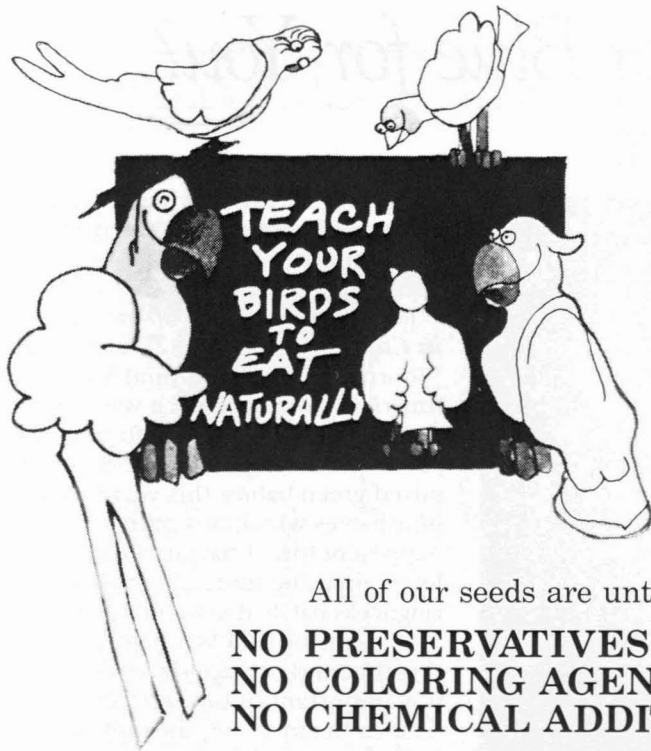
intention spiraled our paths like DNA at the Creation? Both of us, I thought, felt, looked a little guilty of understanding that our relationship was satisfying less than admirable, almost hypocritical needs in each of us, needs which put to shame most of our complaints about our love of freedom and autonomy. And so we tolerated each other—or each other's love—I believing there was love in the possessive, humanist attention I showed him, and he believing that my attention was so much less to be desired than that of my wife, whose own animal instinct for patience in all relationships bound her instantly closer to his acceptance of reality than any ideas I had on the best way to talk to birds or to feed their egos. It was one of her most lovable traits, one easy to feel but not easy to notice for someone as nervous as me, to whom a bird's sudden, frequent, perfectly coordinated movements seemed a natural enough response to the infinitely stimulating, threatening world of light and sound and size.

Despite freedom to move about the house and a long-awaited, full complement of unchewed primaries, Woody still does not fly. Whether this is a sign of intelligence or cowardice, acceptance or refusal, inexperience or stupidity I cannot say. I certainly can't teach him, although he loves to hang upside down from his branch and flap his wings powerfully enough to blur, and be heard two rooms away. At times he seems smart enough to perceive the dangers of negotiating a treeless room, with its corners and glass and objects of

maddening, unpredictable instability, and I feel he's made a choice that only coincidentally is strengthened by an utter ignorance of what it actually takes to fly.

At other times he looks dumb enough to believe that if he doesn't fly he will get the better of us once again, just as he does by not learning a single word of English, by forcing us to treat him as an equal and to suffer in the process not only physical inconvenience but a mortal, manipulable guilt at having bought him in the first place and prolonged the agonizing hypocrisy of pethood. Or it may simply and, he would think, infuriatingly be that he has never allowed us to see him fly. But concealing one's actions from one's intimates is hardly an unfamiliar skill to me, and I may yet hide from him one better than he hides from me. For now he gets the benefit of the doubt. I don't think of Woody either as smart or stupid. I think of him as smart and/or stupid.

He does make a concession to flying, however. About an hour after sunrise every morning he jumpflutters from his cage or its shelf to the floor and walks across the living room and hall, both carpeted, into our bedroom, croaking a low, contented announcement. If he cannot climb onto the bed up an overhanging blanket, he'll try some other way, as long as he uses feet and beak: via throwpillows tossed to the floor, or catching the Harvard frame in his jaw and grasping a sheet or the smooth boxspring cover, or looking for an overhung arm to ease this Gulliveresque mountaineering problem. For he will mount the bed—he has always known success—and step his way lightly in his long nails across covers, body, neck and scalp and pillow, until he has achieved that special place of glory for the ordinary household conure: the windowsill of a screened window open to the summer morning. There he'll sit as long as we let him, while we sleep, while we wake, while my wife and I enjoy our marriage bed, even while we wash and eat and summon up the courage to work another day as if it were our decision. And we let him, for who can deny—who can even estimate—this pleasure, the importance of his communion with some greater, greener world and purpose writ plain in every feature of his face, as he perches worshipfully on the edge of human habitation. ●



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