

People and Birds . . . The Meaning of Our Relationship

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Homo sapiens is unique among all species in its practice of keeping other species as pets. As a psychoanalyst and aviculturist (a breeder of fancy pigeons), the complex and multiple meanings of this phenomenon has been of special interest. The meanings I am discussing here are the deeper, personal meanings that underlie an individual's decision to keep and raise birds. These motivations are partly inherent in our psychology as a species.

We have an innate curiosity and interest in the natural world and a natural appreciation of its aesthetics. Albeit an interest and an appreciation that can be fostered and refined or submerged and blunted. If you have had the pleasure of exposing a young child to the wonderment of birds, you have seen this raw curiosity and pleasure with full

freshness. You have seen what a treasure a feather is, you have seen the open-mouthed awe at watching a chick emerge from its egg, and have sensed the child's wonder at encountering this odd creature that is so like us and so different.

For some people these feelings all too soon pass into cynicism and disinterest. For others of us, the magic never ends. Indeed, as we grow older and become more involved with birds, the wonder increases. We are rewarded, in fact, as is usual in human endeavors, in proportion to the growing depth of our involvement.

For many people the interest in birds was "inherited." We got it from our parents and value our avicultural pursuits in part because of our own identification with the parents who "introduced" us to the birds. The identification, however, does not end there; it includes all our avicultural forefathers. In the case of fancy pigeons, for example, the great nineteenth century breeders, Tegetmeier, Lyell, Fulton, Weir and Eaton, seem like spiritual ancestors to me. In fact, when I read of so eminent a scientist as Charles Darwin (himself a pigeon breeder) thanking W.B. Tegetmeier for his invaluable assistance, I feel a completely unjustified, but nevertheless delightful, sense of pride.

My connection to these nineteenth century fanciers is not, however, completely spurious. Many of these men were the framers of the Standards of Excellence that we are still trying to attain today. Indeed, some of the very pigeons we breed today may well be descended from the pigeons in these gentlemen's lofts.

There is in this a feeling of connection, of participation in a tradition, and even a sense of transcendence that finds its parallel in art, science and religion. Indeed, the breeding of a fine show pigeon is no less a cultural achievement than a Picasso painting, a Mozart symphony, or, for that matter, the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Then there is the meaning that breeding birds can have for us that has to do with the pleasures of competency. The pleasure of a child's learning to walk or speak is not just the praise it earns from parents; it is, much more so, the sheer joy of being able to do it. The pleasures of establishing a superior strain, of breeding a difficult species, of successfully caring for an ill bird are all of this type.

Closely related are the pleasures of competition that we usually think of in

the context of sports. The rivalry, the perseverance, the dedication, the frustration, but also the camaraderie, mutual support, and recognition of achievement are a part of aviculture, albeit in a quieter way, as they are a part of sports. Whatever brings us to the birds to begin with, it is often the unintended benefit of relationships with other people who share our interests and passions that sustains our involvement.

There is one situation especially in which the element of personal meaning comes largely into play. That is with pets. Pets are in their own separate class of animals. They are named, they are considered a part of the family, and they evoke a special feeling and commitment. That our relationships with companion animals have important healthful, even life-prolonging, benefits is now well established in the scientific literature. The personal meanings of these relationships are more varied, and less well understood.

For many people (though I trust not the readers of this magazine), birds are not companion animals, yet in some circumstances, even unlikely ones, can be.

About ten years ago, my son and I went to a three-day pigeon show in Pennsylvania — he was eight at the time. I was busy with my own pigeons and friends, and he was bored and wandered about the show. There were about 3,000 pigeons there, each in an individual cage. In his wandering he came upon what is called a "ready" hen. This is a young female pigeon in the bloom of puberty, ready and eager to mate. So when my son started talking to her and sticking his finger in the cage — as he must have done a hundred times that day — instead of retreating or slapping at his hand with her wing, she strutted over to him and kissed his finger with her beak and let herself be stroked. She was as eager as he to strike up a relationship.

He must have spent a long time with her because the next day when he brought me over to see her, she was visibly delighted to see him and again was very responsive. Fortunately, the bird was not that good a show bird and the owner was willing to sell her. Throughout our trip home, this pigeon sat on his lap cooing and kissing his fingers and doing her best to seduce him into mating. She remained attached to him in this manner for a few weeks after she was home, but since she was now in a loft with other pigeons she eventually found a male pigeon and transferred her affection to him. This bird, because of



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circumstances and hormones, was for a brief period a companion animal and, in fact, always remained unusually tame with my son.

My son, at a time when he needed a "friend," found one in this pigeon. He found a pet. How are we to understand the meaning that such relationships have for us? Certainly the aspect just illustrated is that the companion animal, by its very presence, can be invested with our own human needs and thereby can seem to be responsive to them.

I had a childhood friend who grew up in a very troubled family rife with conflict and anger. When he felt low, he would go into his small pigeon loft and tell his troubles to the birds. He felt that at least *they* understood and appreciated him. I can understand the reader thinking that the pigeons certainly did not understand this boy, but he *felt* they did and he drew real comfort from that experience.

I trust that you will not think that I have taken leave of my senses when I report that people can and do experience their companion animals as mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, and as friends. They experience them that way out of their need to do so; and that very need, displaced onto the animal, invests the animal with the power to, in some small way, meet these needs. A small way, but for some people, at certain times, a significant and meaningful way.

There are other needs, too, that can be met in connection with birds as companion animals. I could focus on many differing examples, but for the purpose of illustration let me focus more deeply on only one. That is, those needs related to difficulties encountered by young children in the developmental phase of separation-individuation. In this phase which runs from the later half of the first year through the second and third years of life, the child is struggling with the process of recognizing his mother as a separate person and himself similarly as a separate individual. At this time, the mother must play a special role in encouraging the child to separate and yet remain available to the child when various stresses force the child back toward a need for a closer relationship with the mother. From the point of view of an observer, the child can be seen alternately pushing mother away and making forays into the wider world and, at other times, clinging to mother and being unwilling to allow her out of his sight.

Any disturbance in this developmental phase will have a lasting effect

on the child's personality as an adult. One effect which, given the normal vicissitudes of life, is not unusual is for the adult to have feelings of distress in any situation that involves separation from loved ones. Or, from another vantage point, to have difficulty trusting the reliability of people upon whom he is dependent. These people will have a special feeling, often a melancholy feeling, when they are exposed to situations where the themes of loss and reunion play a major role. At some level, since no one perfectly negotiates any phase of human development, we all retain some sensitivity to these issues. It is for this reason that stories like *Lassie Come Home* with its theme of loss and reunion can bring a lump to our throats. Now let me offer an hypothesis about how this developmental phase can be reflected in our relationship to birds.

The hypothesis is that a part of our fascination with the mystery of migratory behavior, that birds go so far away and yet can return home, relates to this phase of development. Even more particularly, the sport of racing homer pigeons is probably specifically related to issues from this period. That the very process of racing which involves taking the homers to a distant location and releasing them is a displaced reenactment of the crisis of separation-individuation. The point is made clearer if you'll permit a bit of anthropomorphizing. The just-released pigeon is suddenly afraid to find himself in a strange place and desperately wants to return to his familiar home, like the child at nursery school who suddenly notices mother is gone and desperately searches for her.

Of course, there is more to racing homers than this, but at some deeply unconscious level I think it is precisely this drama, the drama of separation and reunion, that motivates many a racing homer enthusiast. I need hardly add that no one should feel reduced by this understanding. All of our behavior is largely determined by unconscious needs and conflicts. To understand how these needs can be expressed in our avicultural interests adds yet another level to the wonder of our relationship with birds.

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