

Bird Medicine: Falconry as a Spiritual Salve

Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling

2021, Vol. 75(4) 297–298

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DOI: 10.1177/15423050211038311

journals.sagepub.com/home/pcc



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Abstract

This paper is a personal reflection on the healing aspect of falconry. This is a particular style of bird medicine that offers healing in the personal, communal, environmental and transcendental realms. The ways in which this is so, are discussed from the perspective of falconry as a spiritual salve.

Keywords

Raptor, spiritual, therapy, healing, salve, nature

On a crisp fall morning, I release my red-tailed hawk from my fist into the forest ahead of me. Cutting through the sunbeams, she flies to the highest point that her sharp eyes can spot. As I follow after her, I feel the sunbeams on my own face and cannot help but stop to lift my arms in awe of the beauty into which I have been absorbed. This is my therapy. There is something wholly refreshing about nature. Falconry is the soap that I wash myself with as I soak in my sunlit forest bath. The human-raptor¹ relationship is a particular type of soap that washes me right down to my soul. Perhaps more than that, it is a salve that provides a wholistic healing through *bird medicine*.

It has been my experience that the human-raptor bond present in falconry provides a healing salve to all four domains of spiritual well-being – personal, communal, environmental and transcendental (Fisher, 2011). Dr. Karen Stead-Dexter of *Flying in Nature* noted that birds will mirror the internal state of the handler (K. Stead-Dexter, personal communication, February 14, 2021). They have the ability to reveal our inner workings to ourselves. Thus, each time I interact with my bird, I am forced to confront my Self.

Nature allows me to step out of my everyday life and into the natural realm of healing. Falconry involves a primitive partnership in which I as the falconer am permitted into the world of the raptor specifically. In this world, everything but nature disappears. It is refreshing for the body, mind and spirit. Cares and worries are left behind each time the bird takes flight, as total attunement to the natural world takes place. With this attunement comes a sense of oneness. It is as if I am able to access the very essence of

God. This is the hospital in which my healing takes place. A hospital that extends up to and beyond the heights of the sky.

Many take refuge in the sky. Falconry is a craft that has been active in the collective life of humanity since at least 4000 BC. In 2010 falconry was deemed an intangible living cultural heritage of humanity by the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. There is recognition of intergenerational learning as well as local, national and international “meets and festivals [that] provide opportunities for communities to share knowledge, raise awareness and promote diversity” (UNESCO, n.d.). Falconry often involves social engagement, as generations come together through activities such as apprenticeships, club engagements, and group hunts. Louise Engel, President of the Ontario Hawking Club, noted of the social aspect of falconry:

... now that I've been at [falconry] for almost 20 years, the things that I have found most rewarding have to do with the people that falconry has introduced me to. I have met and forged friendships with people that I would otherwise never even have had a conversation with. I have travelled and become connected to people from all over the world who I might never have had the chance to get to know

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and I find that gives meaning and depth to the sport and my life. (L. Engle, personal communication, February 18, 2021)

Falconry flies through the veins of humanity and fosters relationship locally and abroad. It is also vastly spiritual. The universally acknowledged majesty of an eagle, hawk, or falcon (birds commonly used in falconry) is tangible upon approach. History and archaeology provide evidence of an ancient bond between humans and raptors. Eagles, owls and hawks have been considered by many cultures to be messengers to and from the spirit world. They have been worshipped, feared and commemorated. The ancient and innate desire to contact the spirit world through raptors is manifested in reality through ancient crafts like falconry.

It is a highly spiritual experience to encounter *bird medicine* through falconry. Maureen McGeean, a general member of the Ontario Hawking Club and falconer of 11 years noted of the transcendence that she experiences:

[Falconry] is an experience that frees me from a world that makes me uncomfortable and thoughts and feelings that make me uncomfortable. When I [am in the field] nothing exists except the hawk, the land and the chase. I practice mindfulness and immerse myself in the experience. I feel liberated to be who I truly am in these moments. (M. McGeean, personal communication, January 27, 2021)

The experience unique to falconry is transcendental. In a way, I fly through the sun into the trees with my bird. I experience the freedom of her flight and the concentration of her mind. I am wholly immersed in the healing of the natural world, from the thinning canopy of the forest to the crunching leaves under my feet. The smells and sounds become heightened in this world as I move further inward. If I am lucky, I have a good friend or two along to share the experience with. By the time I walk out of the forest, I am refreshed and re-grounded. Each moment spent in this living cathedral is a moment of healing.

At large, my experiences with falconry have left me with increased levels of confidence, mindfulness, and self-awareness. Further, I have kindled a sense of connectedness, meaning, joy, and hope.

Falconry provides *bird medicine* in a wholistic way, encompassing all four domains of spiritual wellness. It innately encompasses intra- and inter-personal connection,

exploration and development. It provides a salve for the soul unlike any other within a holy space. It has the power to connect humans to something larger than themselves. It is a complete therapy for my mind, body, and soul. This is not only my experience, but those of many falconers across the globe and throughout history. The practice of falconry is not just a salve for my soul; it is recognized as a longstanding salve for the soul of humanity.

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Note

1. Raptor refers to birds of prey with hooked beaks and specialized talons with which they seize prey. These are eagles, hawks, falcons, and owls.

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Heather E. Antoni, holds a BRE in Counselling and Intercultural Studies from Emmanuel Bible College and an MA Theology in Spiritual Care and Psychotherapy from Wilfrid Laurier University. She currently holds Registered Psychotherapist (Qualifying) status with the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario and is working toward full registration within the college. Heather is also currently completing Supervised Pastoral Education in order to become a Certified Spiritual Care Practitioner. Heather is a member in good standing in the Ontario Hawking Club and holds a general falconry license in the province of Ontario. Heather holds to a Christian theology and also recognizes and honours her interdependence and spiritual connection with nature. Through her experience in the fields of spiritual care, psychotherapy and falconry, Heather holds a long-term vision of working with bird medicine in order to support others in their psycho-spiritual wellness.