

Snow Bird: A Gift in Dying

by
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“Trust Nature. Nature is always right.”

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Snow had been falling in Nevada City for days, sometimes heavily, sometimes lightly. I awoke one morning to find a beautiful light snow falling once again. With the day crisp and shining, this Sunday morning was simply too beautiful not to go out and be with it. I threw on some clothes, layered a thick wool sweater and down vest over my shirt, laced up my hiking boots, grabbed a hat and gloves, went to my friend's house and borrowed Suki, her little golden Sheltie, and was off for a long walk on an old country road in the woods. What we encountered that day would reveal much to me about the essence of energy and massage work, touching another being, living and dying, and the gifts nature and animals bestow on us.

From the depth of snow on the road, it was clear that the snow had fallen all night. Suki was just learning to be off-leash and was bounding up the road, excited in her new freedom, often making excursions into the woods. I was happy just walking in the middle of the road to that familiar crunching sound of fresh snow compacting under my boots. About a mile and half into our walk, we encountered the only vehicle we would see that day. I called Suki to me and we stood off to the side of the road as a big white pickup truck came down a steep hill. Three laughing teenagers were in the front seat, and then we saw what they were laughing at—a fourth teenager on an old Flexible Flyer sled tied by a long rope to the back of the truck. He too was laughing, but working hard and comically to stay on the sled. We all waved and smiled at each other, and then Suki and I were back on the road.

We had walked less than 100 yards to where the hill crested and flattened out when I saw a little brown bird sitting in the snow in the middle of the road. It was small, not much more than four-inches long, but was very round and puffy for its size. Suki was behind me and hadn't scented it yet. As I approached, I expected it to fly away, but it just sat there facing me, watching me approach, and seemed to have no fear. I walked right up to it, and still it did not move. So I bent down on my haunches, realizing that it must not be able to fly. I reached down and with the inside of my left index finger lightly stroked the bird from the back of its head down the length of its body. The bird allowed me to keep stroking it, showing no anxiety or movement, other than looking up at me and then straight ahead.

Clearly this little creature could not fly—something was wrong. The bird looked very alive and alert, and accepting. I wondered how the pickup truck and the sled had missed hitting it.

Suki had now caught up and approached the little bird. In a soft voice, I told Suki to be easy. She slowly brought her nose up to the bird with curiosity but no aggression. Then, gently, I picked the little bird in my hands and cradled her. She allowed me to touch her, showing no sign of fear, making no movement to get away or try to fly. She was so light, so delicate, so beautiful, with exquisite colorations of brown and tiny flecks of black. I could find no sign of damage, such as being nicked by the truck. I wanted to examine her body more closely, but her wings concealed most of her body. At that moment, she fluttered and stood on her feet raising her wings high and then returned to sitting peacefully in my hands. She had not been trying to get away, but had allowed me to see her all of her body. Nothing seemed to be damaged. Even her wings appeared to be undamaged, but she made no attempt to fly away. She was going to die out here in the cold, if a predator did not find her first. My initial thought was to take her home, get a box for her, some water, and call someone that knew where to take a little bird that could no longer fly. Perhaps there were such rescue places. And then something in me said that would be no real life, that I should allow nature to play out this tiny bird's passing.

Off the road, I found a small bush that seemed a good place under which to lay her down. Still cradling her in my cupped hands, I brushed the snow away with my boot to make spot for her. If I were to leave her to a natural death, what could I do for her? Because she looked so alive, I felt it might take a long time to die, so it might be hours if we waited with her. Then I realized that I could give her Reiki in her time of passing. With one hand I made the Reiki symbols in the air, and said three times a Hindu invocation of peace. I told her that it was all right to go now, though I thought her too alive for that to happen very soon. Then, as I was bending to place her under the bush, she fluttered her wings vigorously. I stopped. I tried a couple of more times to put her down, and she responded the same way. No, she did not want that. I must take her home.

Cradling her in my hands again, the little bird, Suki, and I began the walk home. We had not gone thirty feet when the little bird again fluttered her wings vigorously, raising herself up, and then came down on her side in my hands and was still. All the puffiness of her body has disappeared. She was less now than half of her girth, and she was dying quickly. I stood in disbelief. She was so vital only seconds ago. I brought her up closer to my face and looked into her eye, while with my peripheral vision I watched the upper eyelid slowly coming down. I kept eye contact for about two minutes until the lid closed. She was gone.

I stood there in the middle of the road with the soft snow falling on the small bird, Suki, and me. I was glad that she did not have to die alone. She had someone to touch and hold her, a man and a dog to witness her passing. I would want that. I

have been told that animals do not fear death, that it is natural to them, and have no reason to doubt that wisdom. But something more had been revealed in this moment. How could one explain a bird sitting in the middle of the road and be missed by that truck and sled? The way she let me touch her and hold her? The way she seemed to tell me, no, don't put me on the ground, keep holding me? And, seemingly healthy, the way she simply let go?

My mind could ask all the questions it desired; but the feeling in my body, standing there holding that dead little bird in my hands, was clear: this moment was revealing something about life and death that was different from any concepts I held about animals. This little bird had guided me to simply hold her, be with her, and witness her passing. Yes, death is natural, and animals know that better than we do. This little bird looked peaceful and accepting throughout this experience. Yet it appeared that she did she did not want to die alone, and wanted to be held—attitudes that we do not normally ascribe to animals.

The experience of her dying also had a gift about the work we do touching others. We have the knowledge of where and how to touch and the efficacy of certain techniques and points to hold on the body. But this experience now reminded me of what a teacher said to me many years ago in Polarity Therapy training: That the real healing work happens in the spaces between techniques—in stillness and presence. That what we must remember when we're working with an energy flow pattern or a massage routine to pause at times and just be still and present, to allow our hands to touch another without any thoughts or doing, to simply be with them.

I believe that was the gift of the little bird's dying. I was grateful to have Reiki, to have that lineage of healing hands that goes back to the time of Jesus and the Buddha. When I administered Reiki to the bird, it was good. Yet when I decided to take her home and started walking, I was focused not on doing any work but only on being with her and holding her. That's the deeper work that happens in stillness and presence—and that's when she left. Was that what she wanted? Do I know that? No; but that was the felt sense of it. The rest can stay in the mystery.

I decided that Suki and I would take her home and give her a burial. So I wrapped her in a tissue and placed her in my vest pocket. We had not walked very far when I felt something in me say that we should not end the walk because of this little bird's death. When she died, I felt a finality, that the walk was over. Now, something in me felt right because of her death, and that we should continue walking in nature. In the bird's passing I had begun to feel something beautiful, something right. What came to me was the feeling of the closeness of life and death. Death and life didn't feel like such polar opposites there in nature with the soft snow falling on us. And I realized that I wasn't feeling sad, but alert and alive in my body. As we walked, I would often place my hand on the outside of my vest and hold the little bird.

The falling snow, the flakes much larger but still soft and light, was coming down very slowly and abundantly, like a curtain descending at the end of a play. I had no sense of being cold or tired or hungry or in need of anything. Whatever emotions I was aware of in this experience with the little bird was giving way to something much quieter, to a subtle sense of spaciousness and peace. I was aware that my mind had become very still. I seemed to be just watching. All of nature felt so near, so gentle and friendly and comforting—the soft snow falling on the receiving earth, the gurgling and rushing sounds of the streams, Suki staying close to me now. And the endearing silence of it all. There seemed to be no reason to hurry. We were already home in existence.

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