

My orni-theology

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God is flying to tell me something.

On a recent Saturday I worked beyond the point of exhaustion. Not *to*. *Beyond*. Never mind exactly on what. I like to think it was for a good cause, though that is debatable and not the point here. The point is: I so believed *outcome x* needed to happen that I was willing to do violence to myself to make it happen. That may sound melodramatic to you, but the fact is at the end of the day I felt battered, and the other fact is I do this to myself way more than I wish. Maybe you do, too.

That Sunday I woke up needing sabbath like the state of California needs a week of rain. I read a little, ate a light breakfast, then went for a walk. There's a pasture near our house, with a barbed-wire fence, and as I came to it, six goldfinches flittered up from the wire and began playing in the air. They were flying without aim, more like dancing really, chasing each other, bouncing around on air. Four were males, I think, their spring mating yellow so brilliant, almost neon, that I imagined them having spent the night plugged into a battery charger. They'd return to the barbed wire and talk things over a bit, then fly away again. In my mind I took off my shoes.

I watched until they left for good, then resumed my walk. I thought about those birds the entire time, felt them in me in a way. They were doing a kind of acupuncture in my chest and jaw and brain, unclenching me a little at a time.

I wondered if they'd be there again on my return. I hoped they would, of course, but I told myself that the Beloved doesn't work that way, on command. And sure enough, when I topped the hill and looked for them, where they'd been, they were absent. Do I know God, or what? I thought.

And then up they flew, out of the grass, dancing and coloring the air again.

Answer to my question: *or what*.

The next day I awoke and read this passage from Jim Finley's *The Contemplative Heart*:

If the granting of the contemplative experience of the depths occurs in seeing a flock of birds descending, then, in the contemplative beholding of birds, you have found your practice, to which you can quietly commit yourself in an ongoing process of learning to see and take to heart the divinity of birds.

I left the house before light, heading to the gym for a swim. Inside I felt my work-week self revving for action. I was doing math in my head: what time is it now? what time do I need to be at my office? how long can I swim and still get there on time? I wasn't speeding, but I was driving efficiently, definitely a shade quicker than relaxed.

It was misty and foggy. As I drove by the pasture, exactly where the goldfinches had been the day before, a larger bird popped out from the foggy dark to my right and almost collided with my windshield. I hit the brakes hard, and we missed each other. Slow down, it said. I'm going swimming, I said back, I'll definitely be slowing down, and I resumed my speed.

Ten seconds later another bird flew in front of me, same as the first, and I braked again. Now! it said. Okay! Okay! I'm listening, I said back, and I eased up. On the gas. And on myself.

A few minutes later a third bird flew in front of me—that makes a trinity, by the way—but with this one I was going slower, and there was no near-collision. That's better, it said.

St. Francis talked with birds. Victor Frankl described one coming to him in the concentration camp, embodying the spirit of his deceased wife. Emily Dickinson wrote, "To hear an oriole sing/ May be a common thing/ Or only a divine."

I'm with them. This God thing is for the birds.