

The birds of the air: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24-34

by [Tom McGrath](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

My wife and I have found a great remedy for those times when life seems overwhelmingly stressful, our worries mount, and our inner resources seem depleted. We consider the birds of the air.

Specifically, we pop in a DVD titled *Winged Migration*, Jacques Perrin's Oscar-nominated documentary that follows dozens of species of birds on their amazing migratory trek—some covering more than 2,000 miles. On Friday nights or Sunday evenings when we are too spent to read but wary of the silly and gruesome fare on network television, we pull out this disk. As the opening credits roll, we may be anxious and worried about our lives. But within minutes we are mesmerized at the sight of gaggles of birds, large and small, elegant and comical, obeying the secret inner prompting that sets them to fly hundreds, even thousands of miles to serve the demands of life and survival. Perrin, working with five crews totaling 450 people, including 17 amazing cinematographers, makes you feel as though you're traveling with and among the flocks, close enough to see the determined looks on their faces and hear the relentless beating of their wings.

Knowing how my own worries melt away as I watch this film, I'm not surprised that Jesus directs our gaze toward nature when he warns against undue anxiety. The same thing happens in my backyard when I take a moment to watch the sparrows dart, or out on the golf course when I forget the game and simply gaze at the beauty of the rolling landscape. Some find serenity in hiking, others in rowing a boat on a pristine lake, and some in tending a flower box in a tenement window.

Contemplation of nature is a reliable remedy for the worries that can paralyze and plague us. Nature, being God's handiwork, is a source of revelation, disclosing something of the one who created it all. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," writes poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, and that grandeur shines through for those who have the eyes to see. When Jesus points us toward the birds of the air or the lilies of the field, he is not just trying to get our minds off our worries; he is pointing us to a way of discerning the larger purposes of God.

Yet it's easy to misunderstand Jesus here. We may be tempted to dismiss these examples, thinking that if flowers and birds are carefree, it's because they're oblivious and unaware of what might be in store for them. As the old bumper sticker says, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs—you clearly don't comprehend the situation." I sense that Jesus points to the birds and the lilies as examples because they unselfconsciously participate in the life of God, life which is pouring forth through all creation. Undue worry blocks that participation, which is why we humans often feel distant and disconnected from God. Fear closes down our hearts; worry puts up a barricade to grace. The birds and the lilies and all of nature have lessons to teach us about being unobstructed channels for the flow of God's grace.

We need to absorb and integrate those lessons because God has big plans for us. St. Paul writes that we are meant to be "stewards of the mysteries of God." That's quite a job description. What kind of stewards will we be if our minds and hearts are closed to the very mysteries we are meant to steward and share?

A trustworthy wine steward has the full run of the master's house. He descends into the wine cellar and brings up the finest wines, full of spirit, fruit of the vine, and symbol of spiritual transformation. Attuned to the ways of the master and the needs of the guests, the steward matches the wine to the occasion—to the food, to the mood, to the meaning of the moment. As stewards of God's mysteries, we are meant to incorporate those mysteries but not keep them to ourselves.

Before my father died, he was recuperating from surgery at a large care facility. The size of the complex and the great number of people in difficult straits being treated there might have made the facility dreary. But the administration and staff had taken great care to respond to the patients' spiritual and human needs just as they took care of their physical needs. They placed a large aviary in the middle of a spacious day room. Patients in all states and conditions gathered there and watched dozens of brightly colored birds flit and chirp and peck at bird seed in the glassed-in, sunlit enclosure.

I noticed how every face was softened with delight as patients watched the birds. No matter their age, the people became like little children—forgetting their troubles and engaging one another in conversation. The care facility's managers were not just good health care providers; they also chose to be trusted stewards of the mysteries of God tending to mind, heart, body and soul.

We are called to be stewards of God's mysteries to all the people we encounter. Wanting to become a more trustworthy steward, I turn to sources of revelation. So if you see me staring out the window, know that I'm simply meditating, hoping to become as attentive to my inner promptings as the birds who suddenly and mysteriously know it's time to gather up and fly away home.