# Birth pangs: Sometimes you cannot give help

by Barbara Brown Taylor in the December 13, 2003 issue

In the absence of a real, live spiritual director, I often turn to the Desert Fathers for wisdom about living a holy life on earth. My farm is no desert, but enough happens here for me to understand St. Anthony's reply to the philosopher who asked him how he could be happy without books. "My book is the nature of created things," Anthony said to him, "and any time I want to read the words of God, the book is before me."

The last time one of my guinea hens hatched her own keets, they were gone in two days. I figure that the gray fox, the black snake and the red-tailed hawk that live off this land held a private meeting and agreed on three keets each. Since guinea hens are such wretched mothers once they leave the nest, the predators had it easy. They just waited for the hen to go chase some bug and leave her babies struggling in the high grass. When the babies cried for help, the predators pounced and that was that. Anyone who pays attention knows that Mother Nature takes no prisoners.

When I found that same guinea hen sitting on a new clutch of eggs in the meadow below the house, my husband, Ed, and I formed a plan. We would let her set right up until the last week. Then we would steal the eggs, hatching them ourselves in a borrowed incubator. Unaware of our treachery, she risked her life nightly, guarding her nest on the ground while the rest of the flock roosted in the rafters of the barn. She would not even rise to eat until the afternoon sun hit the nest just right, warming the eggs long enough for her to search for food. One afternoon three weeks into her vigil, she returned to an empty nest. Circling it once to make sure she had the right place, she sat back down and guarded her phantom clutch until the day they were due to hatch.

Late that same day, Ed called me at work. "If you want to be here, you'd better come," he said. "The eggs are cheeping." When I walked into the tool shed, he opened the incubator so I could hear the ten sealed eggs all talking to each other.

(This changes one’s relationship to hard-boiled eggs forever.) An hour later, there was a commotion inside one cream-colored egg and a crack appeared across the top of it. An hour after that, a piece of shell flew across the incubator, and half an hour after that, a wet little guinea hen flung one orange leg outside the shell and unfolded into the light.

Over the next 12 hours, nine more did the same thing, although not all of them with as much aplomb. The last chick had such a hard time leaving the shell that a piece of it dried to her head, trapping her half in and half out. The cardinal rule of being a Bird Mother is that you cannot help, because the fight to escape the shell somehow kick starts all of a keet’s systems. Those that cannot manage by themselves may die anyway, but if you help them then you wreck their odds. That is the wisdom, anyway, and I was not about to test it my first time around.

In what had to be one of the most agonizing tests a pastor can undergo, I sat there in my imaginary straitjacket watching the chick struggle while her shell hardened around her. Her labors grew weaker as the time between them increased. Finally she laid her head down on the plastic shelf of the incubator and did not try any more. Figuring she was a goner, Ed lifted the keet, shell and all, and placed her in the straw-lined wooden box with her siblings. Huddled under a 60-watt light bulb, they were in constant motion, all climbing on top of one another as they each tried to crawl closest to the light.

When the trapped keet heard them cheeping, she cheeped too and the heads of the others swiveled in her direction. Then they called to her (“Lazarus, come out!”) and the sound galvanized her. She lifted her head off of the straw, shuddered all over and heaved free. On orange rubber legs, she staggered over to the pile of warm feathers and dove underneath them, leaving her old shell behind her like a shroud.

The other babies welcomed her by treading on her. This looked harsh, but turned out to be just what she needed. With nine pairs of keet feet, they dried and revived her better than any Swedish masseur could have done. A blob of bloody tissue hung from her body that looked ominous to me, but her brood mates pecked at it until it was gone, leaving nothing to distinguish her from the rest of them.

Within an hour, the keets were all eating green clover and biddie mash. One by one, they walked over to the red plastic water trough and sipped from it as if they had studied instructions on its use in the shell. None of them asked for a chaplain. They

did not even need a mother. My job, as it turned out, was not to crack shells, extract keets, dry feathers or pour mash into mouths. My job was simply to make a safe place, keep the predators away, and let the community do what it knew how to do. I hope I can remember that the next time I feel the urge to rescue someone from being born.

Six weeks later, the keets rejoined their elders, who greeted them with a great screeching chorus of bird delight. “Go sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything,” Abba Moses said. In a pinch, he might have added, even a tool shed will do.