



Chaika

## Learning from the Barred Owl

by *Betty Lou Chaika*

In early April I was climbing along a rocky slope above New Hope Creek in Duke Forest near my home in North Carolina. Pinxter azaleas were bursting open all around. Despite the beauty, I was feeling closed, distant. Realizing I could step out of this alienation, letting it drop from me like a piece of clothing, I began repeating to myself, almost chanting, “*I am* related to all this. *I am* a lover of all this.” I felt connected instantly. The words cut through a veil that had been keeping me separate from this place.

Just then a barred owl began calling — in broad daylight. It was as if my inner surrender had invited an outer response. I suddenly remembered other times when a barred owl called or appeared just when I had passed through a choice point, a crossroads. The owl seemed to say, “Yes, this *is* an emotional and spiritual decision point. Notice it. You’re headed in the right direction. I support you by calling attention to that.”

I experienced an expanded sense of meaning and connection, as often happens with such synchronicities. I felt the sense of kinship I have felt whenever a barred owl has spoken at precisely these kinds of turning points. The universe seemed to confirm that, yes, we *are* related to all of nature, and thinking, feeling, knowing so *is* the right attitude to take. This is the attitude vital to our health that, in turn, allows us to work for the health of nature.

When these direct, confirming experiences fade as cars and concrete replace their reality, I can easily lose the sense of being in intimate relationship to the nature I love. Nature is the medium through which I most often experience spirit. As my “church” is destroyed by development, it is harder and harder for me to access my spirituality. Our culture does not encourage keeping a sense of connection with nature or a sense of continuity with Earth-based spirituality. Sometimes I feel very lonely and find it hard to keep on track. I get easily lost. There are no agreed-upon outer signposts along the way, such as an organized religion would provide. For me encounters in nature are like markers along the path. Holding onto the experiences themselves is not the issue. What is important is that they signify



and confirm that we *are* related to nature, that spirit infuses nature, and that there is a dynamic, creative process linking spirit, nature, and human.

Several years ago I had an experience involving crows and an owl. In the morning we received a call telling us that my husband's mother had had a stroke, and her recovery was uncertain. As my husband began making his plans to fly cross-country the next morning, I realized I wanted to go with him to support him and his family. But my anxiety about flying arose and held me back. I couldn't make a decision about going without first dealing with this fear. It was clear to me I needed support to quickly work through this decision process. So I started calling friends and neighbors, but no one was home. I left messages. While waiting, I paced and paced, and other fears surfaced, such as anxiety about leaving our children at home and concern about imposing on my husband's family.

Suddenly some crows landed in our yard, and I wondered what was going on. Crows often hang out in the woods where we live, but never in our yard. Ten or twelve of them flew down and drank at the creek. Then they flew over and perched on a big pine and preened. I began to wonder if there might be a symbolic message in this event that could help me in my decision-making process. Having my attention caught by the crows and opening to the possibility of a larger message or a more inclusive thought process created a shift. I went from a sense of the *scared* to a sense of the *sacred*. (I like how making that little change, transposing those two letters, signifies a big change in perception.) I looked up the significance of crows in some animal symbolism books and found that crows symbolize the ability to shapeshift

---

I went from a sense  
of the *scared* to  
a sense of the *sacred*.

---

your old reality, old habits, fears, and own your ability to re-create your reality. People began calling back, offering their support and wisdom. We arranged for neighbors to take care of the kids. A friend came over and gave me a quick counseling session to deal with my old fears of flying. I felt clear and made my reservation to fly to Oregon in the morning.

Later that day I left for my office to see some clients. When I stopped at the end of our street before turning onto the road, I saw a very large bird swoop down. At first I thought it was an eagle. No, it was a barred owl. Broad daylight, and it landed there on the telephone wires right across the road, facing me squarely. I couldn't move. It didn't move.

Slowly it turned its head down to the right and watched a car go by, then looked straight at me with its enormous brown eyes. It slowly turned its head to look down on the ground below and back up at me. I watched as it gradually turned the whole feathered helmet of its head and neck seemingly all the way around to look behind and again back at me. Then it looked slowly to the left as another car went by and right back at me. The owl continued to look away at things and back at me as if it had all the time in the world. Finally I had to tear myself away to get to my office on time. What an amazing event--coming face to face with a barred owl while headed in the *right direction!*

I took this encounter as a confirmation to trust in connecting with higher life energies to help deal with urgent issues in a sacred manner. The image of the owl burned in my memory and continued to remind me to live in trust instead of fear. Crows, owl, lots of feathered friends were helping me with my fear of flying! Both crows and owls have traditionally been seen as harbingers of death, but for me their message was about how to deal with my fear of death.

Sadly, my mother-in-law died the night we arrived in Oregon. A few days later when I woke early to fly back home to the children, I caught the tail end of a dream about being a worker at a nature conference. In the dream a man came up to me wanting to know how to find the room where people were studying the owls. I went to help him find it. I took this dream as a flying-home message — remember to think about the owls!

On several other occasions a barred owl has begun calling just when I have been writing in my journal about having reached a challenging decision or an attitude change. Each time I've had a sudden feeling of confirmation that I was at a crossroads and I was crossing it in the right direction, in the direction of the sacred.

The barred owl's call is usually transliterated as, "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?" But this has never made any sense to me. I think the barred owl really calls out, "Who *looks* for you? Who *looks* for *who*? - ah!" Meister Eckhart said, "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me." This reminds me of the chant, "All I ask of you is to remember me as loving you." Who is singing this to whom? I'm feeling lost, alone and searching, calling to God, "Help, come find me," when suddenly



God, in the form of the owl, appears saying, "I've been here all along, waiting for *you* to find *me*." I feel seen, known. Now I can even appreciate what I fancy is the deeper meaning of the seemingly trivial, "Who cooks for you?" It means: who are you all serving, anyway, the larger Self's spiritual purpose or merely the limited, small-self's secular agenda?

---

"I've been here all along, waiting for *you* to find *me*."

---

Immediately after writing about these owl encounters I ran into a friend, Dave, who is a wonderful teacher of nature programs for children and asked him about his animals. "Funny you should ask," he said. "I just got a call from someone offering me an injured barred owl, and I'm going to get him in the next day or two." I told him I might like to come over and see his owl, but I never made the time, and the idea slipped away.

Months later I realized I hadn't heard any owls in ages. I began wondering when I'd hear one again, wondering what I would be doing when I heard one again, wondering *what I would have to be doing in order to hear one* again. I realized I had gotten disconnected from my body, nature, creativity and spirituality, once again denying my soul needs. I felt that telltale sense of dis-ease. Shamanic healing is a powerful metaphor for me and calls me to learn how to retrieve soul through a re-joining of inner nature with outer nature. I renewed my commitment to practice the form of shamanism that my inner teacher teaches me, working with energy, breath, movement, meditation, ritual, focused intention, and alert attention to nature.

For two days I resumed my practice, and the second night a barred owl woke me up with a very loud and close, "Who, who, who, who, who-ah! Who, who, who, who, who-ah!" I went to the window and listened as its calls gradually moved further away. I laid back down to sleep when suddenly the owl was back, even closer, screaming, "Who-ah! Who-ah!" I thought about calling Dave and telling him I wanted to come over and sit with his barred owl. I fell back to sleep thinking about what the barred owl has symbolized for me: clear vision, seeing in the dark, seeing the hidden side of things, dreams, discernment, and being at a crossroads choosing the right direction.

I awoke with the following dream:

I come into a classroom late and sit in my seat. I'm trying to understand the project the teacher is assigning. He hands each of us a large-format booklet of poems and writings. We are to select a piece and somehow write about or present it. In the next row, a couple of seats back, sits Dave. We make eye contact, and energy flows between us. I go up to the teacher and ask questions to clarify the assignment.

Later I see Dave outside. He tells me there is a poem called Earth's Story in the booklet that he will work on, and he imagines I might like to write about that poem also. Yes, I would. I feel understood. I tell him I'd like to come sit with his owl. He hugs me and I feel full of a sensual, fertile, creative energy.

I awoke from this dream with a strong feeling of the presence of the archetypal Teacher, the Task, the Owl, and the Positive Masculine supporter of the Feminine instinctual energies.

The morning I was to go over to visit Dave's owl, I was doing my meditation practice at 5:00 a.m. when a barred owl called, "Who-ah, Who-ah, Who-ah, Who-ah!" Perhaps this was another confirmation of going in the right direction, calming my ego's fearful resistance and choosing to follow through on an impulse coming from my soul. I had imagined I would just sit with the owl and write whatever came to me. But, as I walked out the door I grabbed my sketchbook instead.

In Dave's backyard there is a shed, and in the shed there is a large cage, half of it inside the shed and half extending outside it. Christopher, the barred owl, an adolescent about four years old, was sitting on a perch up in the darkest corner. Entering the cage I was struck by his towering presence, the tilt of his head, and the look of compassion in his enormous liquid brown eyes, like dark pools. The size and power of his feet and claws! You never see such claws in those cutesy owl pictures on greeting cards. Fleshy pinkish tan, much like gnarled bony fingers, they looked almost as big as mine. Imagine your fingers on a one-year-old child to get an idea of the proportions! For two hours I drew pictures of him, and he never once took



his eyes off me.<sup>1</sup> I felt *seen*. Seeing and being seen, it was as if we crossed the boundary between species into a kind of co-perception, a co-seeing. I understood why the owl is associated with the crone, wisdom, in women's spiritual symbolism.

When I called Dave to tell him my experience of Christopher, our impressions of him were so similar that it felt like sharing loving observations of a mutual friend. Dave talked about the owl's presence and compassionate gaze as being "like a wise master or teacher." He told me the reason Christopher can't go back to the wild is because one eye is scratched and the other eye is blind, so he would not be able to judge distances. "Makes you think about *levels of seeing*," he said.

It is uncanny how many times I have felt seen by or confirmed by a barred owl. I understand the sense of mystery owls have evoked in people for ages. Being curious, I wanted to know the secrets of the barred owl's mysterious life. I've learned that barred owls are almost completely nocturnal. They live in large, unfragmented tracts of old deciduous forests and wooded river bottoms with mature trees large enough for nest cavities and perching cover and an open understory to fly through. Habitat loss through logging and development has greatly reduced the numbers of these birds. Where human populations rise, barred owl populations fall.

Barred owls feed mostly on small rodents such as mice, voles and even squirrels. They can locate prey by sound alone. Their ears are located far apart at the sides of their wide face disks, which collect and funnel sound to their ears. Their ear openings are larger than most birds', shaped differently from each other, and one is higher than the other. This asymmetry makes sounds register differently in each ear. They triangulate these readings to target their prey. Their very large eyes with oversize pupils and extra rods permit them to see in a tiny fraction of the light we would need. Human-like, their eyes are located close together facing forward permitting binocular, 3-D vision which makes prey stand out from the background, further sharpening their striking accuracy. They perch unmoving on a tree limb, then swoop down through the trees grabbing the prey in their huge talons. The feathers on their four-foot wings are frayed on the edges to deflect air silently. The prey doesn't even hear them coming. They swallow small prey whole, head

---

<sup>1</sup> *Editor's note:* The picture Ms. Chaika drew of this barred owl is on page 2.

first, and regurgitate the indigestible parts such as bones, teeth, and fur wrapped in small packages called pellets.

We can learn *about* wild animals and we can learn *from* them. After entertaining the children in his audience with the hyperactive antics of a macaw, my friend Dave likes to end his show by bringing out the calm, still, yet powerful barred owl. He talks to the children about the advantages of being able to observe things silently and secretively, like an owl. He tells them we have to practice being very quiet and alert to observe animals in nature. Yes, I notice that it is when I'm practicing being centered, clear in my intention, and alert in my attention that I most often experience visitations from wildlife, in the wild and in dreams.

---

We can learn *about*  
wild animals and we  
can learn *from* them.

---

Barred owls are one more reason we must honor and protect the large, unfragmented forests we have left, for their sake and for ours. Following through on the assignment from the teacher in my dream, I make this presentation of my reading of the Earth's Story, the part about the psychological and spiritual intimacy we can experience with wild animals.

© Betty Lou Chaika, 2001

