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Nature Writing

Summer 2010

Giving Heidegger the Bird: How an Avian Friendship Discredits a Nazi

I really wanted to keep Henry Bird, but Henry Bird really wanted to bite my three-year-old's fingers off. Henry also knew more swear words than a drunken frat boy and, unlike the drunken frat boy, he actually used them appropriately in conversation. I was afraid that even if he left my child's fingers intact, he would teach my son some words that I was hoping the boy wouldn't even hear until at least middle school. Still, I really loved that bird, and not like how I love chocolate or a good book and a glass of wine, but with a human love, not unlike how a sister loves her little brother. Some people think that's crazy, that you can't really have a human-like relationship with a pet because any feelings the animal has back for its owner is just a projection of the owner's own feelings. Some people are unfeeling Nazis whose philosophical outlook I find irritating and can do without. I loved Henry and Henry loved me.

At just under 10 inches, Henry was a tad bit on the small side for an African Grey parrot; they usually range between 10 and 14 inches tall. He wasn't short on language skills though. No one ever stopped to count how many words he knew, but African Greys have the capacity to learn over 2,000 words and the intelligence to know what they are saying, and Henry was no slouch. Now, don't go thinking I'm the one he picked up all that colorful language from. My uncle taught him that - Henry Bird was his roommate and they were very attached to one another. Although Uncle Tim was a gregarious sort of fellow who loved and helped everyone

around him, Henry only loved Uncle Tim. This is quite typical behavior for the Congo African Grey who are less social than the Timneh African Grey. Congos are more nervous around new people and new situations, which makes them tend to bond to one person. That would change for Henry when we got to know each other.

My uncle was about halfway between my age and my father's, so he was like an uncle and a big brother all wrapped in one. I was 17 and Henry was nine when he and Uncle Tim moved into our house. Everyone who knew my uncle knew him to be kind, caring, loving and giving. What they didn't all know about him was that he was addicted to cocaine. My dad did, so I didn't get to spend much time with Uncle Tim after he moved out of my grandparent's home. Dad wouldn't take us over to his brother's house because he was afraid of what we would find and who would be hanging around if we went for a visit. Dad disapproved strongly of Uncle Tim's lifestyle so they hadn't been on good speaking terms for a while, but when Dad heard that Uncle Tim was sinking lower into the addiction, he took action. He went over late one night and yanked his brother up out of his house and had a very forceful, one-on-one style intervention. Next thing I knew, Uncle Tim was in rehab and Henry Bird was in my living room.

Poor bird didn't know where he was or who all these new people were that kept staring into his cage. His eyes kept darting around nervously with a look that said "I don't really belong here." I knew that look; I often had it myself being a weird little drama rat that wore stage-hand black clothes all the time and was often called "different" from the rest of the family. Dad even called me his strange little bird. Henry and I bonded immediately. I was the only one who could hold him, pet him or even change his food and water without worrying about getting bit.

When my younger brother would walk by his cage, Henry would call him a jerk emphasized by some colorful explicative. My older sister, to my delight, would often be

compared to a female dog. I, however, would be called to sweetly with a sing-songy "C'mere!" If I didn't answer, I would get a more forceful command of "Let me out!" Not responding at this point meant Henry Bird would start comparing me to my sister. I didn't often ignore Henry. This was important for him because African Greys, like other species of highly intelligent birds, need a lot of interaction and attention. They get bored very easily and will start destroying everything around them, including themselves. Parrots can actually go crazy and start plucking out all their own feathers; without intensive rehabilitation, these neglected birds will suffer an early death. Considering African Greys tend to live 60 - 70 years, they truly are a lifetime commitment of constant love and attention.

I went to some of the family rehab sessions with Uncle Tim while he was doing his in-patient treatment. No one else in the family would go except my dad and me. Everyone cared about Uncle Tim and wanted to see him get better, but that type of atmosphere is either intimidating or uncomfortable to most people. I was not easily intimidated and didn't fit in most places anyway, so I went. After his in-patient treatment was over, Uncle Tim wasn't supposed to be by himself for a while, so he moved in with us and Henry Bird. We spent a lot of time together, especially because I wasn't allowed to go very many places alone either. Since we were often home by ourselves while everyone was out wherever they wanted be, our running joke was that we were both always grounded. It was the perfect situation to really get to know one another very well. This was very important for me, because like most teenage girls, I was struggling to get to know myself. Uncle Tim smiled at me one night and told me that of all the people in the family, he and I were most alike. He joked that I was just the good version and he was the bad version and then he looked me in the eye and said with all seriousness "Don't ever go bad." This meant the world to me. I had felt so different from the rest of the family and so unconnected, but

all at once I had a real bond. It bonded me not only to Uncle Tim, but the rest of the family as well. That was truly the beginning of me learning to be comfortable with myself and who I really was inside. I also took his advice to heart and never even tried a cigarette, much less a drug.

Eight years would pass before I would come to the full realization that Uncle Tim had never really gotten off drugs. He tried, he tried really hard, but it was just something he couldn't overcome. I was 25-years-old and out for a night of dancing with the girls when my pager started going off in rapid succession. I hadn't switched it to vibrate and so, in the noisy atmosphere of the dance club, I missed every one until I glanced down and saw the pager light up. My parent's number came up 12 times. I ran outside to find a payphone and quickly called my dad. He said to come over to his house, but wouldn't tell me anything other than my son and husband were fine, just come quickly. It was a 30-minute drive home that took only 14 long, tortuous minutes. I opened the door to find my mom, dad, brother and sister sitting around crying. Uncle Tim was dead. He laid down in bed after work to take a nap and his heart went to sleep with him. His poor heart was just over-worked and tired from all those years of straining it with cocaine. He died with cocaine in his system. I sat there in silent shock, not knowing what to say or do. Finally, I spoke four small words: "I want Henry Bird."



Martin Heidegger was a philosopher who would have said that my relationship with Henry was one that I had created in my mind. Heidegger was obsessively concerned with the question of "being." He thought that all previous philosophy had short-sightedly concerned itself with what is being, when it should have concerned itself with what is a being. A subtle difference that was huge in the world of philosophy. When dealing with what is being, the concern is placed fully on the purpose of human existence. The addition of a simple vowel changes the question

from what "is" being to what is "a" being and expands the discussion from humans to all things in existence. Heidegger thought that when we eliminated the "a", we then placed a human thought and observance on everything, rather than allowing things to exist in their own right. This is what he would have said I was doing with Henry. I wasn't able to ask Henry what he thought of our relationship or even if we had one at all, and Henry, for all his expansive vocabulary, had never explained it to me. Despite his high intelligence, amazing communication skills and socialization, Henry simply lacked that human understanding that allows us to discuss and understand concepts at more than a visceral level. So, without knowing exactly what Henry thought, I was denying him his own rightful existence and placing his value as a being fully in my estimation of his being which was bound up in my personal feelings. Silly Heidegger! This kind of thinking is a trap.

Nothing explains the fault in Heidegger's thinking more than his ponderings on Van Gough's painting *A Pair of Shoes* (1886). He describes the shoes by their meaning and use in an attempt to infuse them with their own sense of being. The shoe's purpose is to cover the peasant woman's feet as she toils in the dirt, and function as a connection between the peasant woman and the earth. "If the shoes themselves disclose both the 'earth' and 'world', Van Gough's painting reveals this revelation, opening up for the viewer a silent attentiveness to Being that they, presumably, lack" (Garrad, *Ecocriticism* 111). Problem is, the shoes didn't belong to a peasant woman toiling in the dirt; they were Van Gough's shoes. The woman's entire existence is an idea thought up in Heidegger's own head that is relative to his own emotion and experience. Heidegger's meditation is false and so is his idea that we can get away from a human sense of being that allows every "being" to exist within its own right. He cannot explain the shoes in a way that is completely non-human in nature; words are inherently human. Though Henry Bird

had a command of thousands of words, those words were not of his own making. Left on his own in the wild, Henry would have made countless noises and calls, but none of them would have been human words.

Not only is it impossible to divorce a description of being from a sense of humanity because of language, it is dangerous to delve into this arena of thought. It is not irrelevant that Martin Heidegger was a Nazi. I don't mean that in the modern sense of lazy debate. Lately it seems that anytime people get into a debate, somewhere along the way, someone is going to completely dismiss another person's thoughts and ideas by pulling out the Nazi card. "I know someone else who thought like that - the Nazis" and BAM! anything the accused says after that is null and void, just like any idea coming from the Nazi way of thinking. Heidegger was an actual Nazi - "card number 312589" (Garrard , ISLE 255). He joined the National Socialist Party in May of 1933, and remained a member until the end of its existence. As rector of Freiburg University, Heidegger was instrumental in crafting party policy. The strange thing is that for all this dismissing people for having Nazi ideas, an actual Nazi is still being utilized in the fields of philosophy, literary criticism and more.

Why hasn't Heidegger been dismissed? Dr. Greg Garrard thinks he should be, and I tend to agree. In his article "Heidegger Nazism Ecocriticism," Garrard shows just how dangerous this idea of separating a sense of humanity from a sense of being really is. Placing every *thing*, from a human to a pair of shoes, on the same level makes them equally unimportant, rather than equally important. He points out in Heidegger's writings that "he relativizes Nazi crimes by equating them with the Allied blockade of Germany as well as the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also argues that the enframing of fields of wheat is 'in essence the same' as the reduction of the racial enemies of Nazism to 'standing reserve,' on call for annihilation" (262). It

is precisely a sense of humanity that allows people to consider other people *and* other things with a sense of caring and compassion which is precisely why the American Humane Society is aptly named even though it deals with the treatment of animals, and it is precisely why I was able to have an actual relationship with Henry Bird. If I had given Henry his own sense of separate being, he would have become separate from me and unimportant in my life. At the moment of my uncle's death, Henry was everything. He encapsulated every feeling coursing through my body, soul and mind.



I couldn't have Henry Bird that night. In the course of the eight years between rehab and his death, Uncle Tim had married a woman I barely knew and she wanted to keep Henry. She probably wanted him like any other memento of her husband. It wasn't because of a deep love for Henry. I know this because almost exactly a year later she called my dad saying that she couldn't keep Henry anymore and suddenly, he was back at my parent's house. He was in bad shape. He hadn't been receiving all the love and attention that a parrot needs and the house he lived in hadn't been receiving the attention it needed either. In her depressed state of mind, Uncle Tim's wife had stopped taking care of Henry, stopped cleaning house, stopped doing anything really. Consequently, the house became infested with cockroaches that scurried into Henry's cage to steal his food. He fought back valiantly slaying bug after bug, making them into a light snack. Cockroaches, however, are known for carrying many diseases and do not make a good snack for parrots. Eating the bugs had given Henry an infection that traveled into his right leg and paralyzed his foot; he would never again be able to perch and would require a lot more care than ever.

I still wanted him; I wanted to be the one to give him that care. My dad wouldn't hear of it given Henry's burning desire to eat my child's fingers. He was right and even though I knew it, I didn't want to admit it. My mom and dad traveled a lot at this point in their life and wouldn't be around enough to give Henry the proper care he deserved, so they couldn't keep him either. We found the perfect home for Henry right across the street. My parent's neighbor and his husband offered to take our precious little bird. Nature wouldn't allow the couple to have children of their own and the law wouldn't allow them to adopt, so they built their family out of a menagerie of animals that desperately needed a home. They took excellent care of Henry, loving and spoiling him right through the end of his severely shortened life.

I was happy for Henry, but I was unhappy for me. The last year had been so rough while I was trying unsuccessfully to come to terms with my uncle's death. I couldn't find a place for it in my head that made any sense and I was having so much trouble trying to make peace with it. My dad knew this and he knew that taking care for Henry would have helped me find peace, so he came up with a different solution. Uncle Tim had a tiny, little lovebird named Sunshine that his wife could no longer keep either. Sunshine was a peach-faced yellow lovebird that had flown down out of nowhere and landed on Uncle Tim's shoulder as he stepped outside to smoke a cigarette. When I went to go meet her, she flew up onto my shoulder and nuzzled up against my neck. I fell instantly in love. I went about spoiling her rotten by setting her up in a giant, 2 foot by 3 foot terrarium, meant for much larger animals, complete with a little wooden "tree" for her to perch in. I never cut her wings and hardly ever kept the top to her cage in place, so she flew around my house at will and spent a lot of time nuzzling on my shoulder.

Lovebirds are very loving and affectionate birds that are actually a species of small parrots. Like their larger cousin the African Grey, they are playful, amusing, highly intelligent

and require a lot of attention. They long for companionship and so are usually paired with another lovebird. If a lovebird is not paired, then it will find a companion in their human owner. Sunshine was my constant companion. In the time that I had her, she saw me through a lot of rough patches. Caring for her helped me to find peace with my uncle's death, just as my dad had wisely thought. She also helped me through a rough divorce and the major changes that followed. I would talk to her about everything I was going through and she would nuzzle and listen. She would often chirp and make an amazing number of whistles and songs, but unlike her cousin Henry, lovebirds can't talk. She could mimic a myriad of noises with deft accuracy, but she could not mimic speech. This gave her even less of an opportunity than Henry had to say how she really felt. But she didn't really need to use human words to express how she felt, she showed me in her own little birdie way and I knew it in my very human way. I know love when I see it and I don't need to understand it in any other way than human to feel it from anything not human, including my birds.

Screw Heidegger! That irritating, philosophical Nazi lost his humanity and lost his ability to care about anything more than his own stilted intelligence. I am much better off without his ponderings on what is "a" being. I loved Henry Bird and Sunshine and they loved me and that is all I really need to know.

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