

The Man Who Talked to the Cockatoos (fiction)
(originally published in Pet Bird Report)

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There is a story, the existence of which is not disputed, of a man who loved and protected cockatoos. In fact, he loved all wildlife and looked after all the animals on his farm with respect and compassion. To him, all animals were part of an extended circle, with people being no more, and no less, than members of a single family. But his particular love was for parrots and especially for his salmon-crested cockatoo, who had provided him with many years of joy and companionship. Of special delight was the cockatoo's sentience, and uncanny ability to sense and respond to what the old man was thinking and feeling. Mirroring this sentience was the surprisingly deep and empathetic expression that this cockatoo displayed behind her large, deep, black eyes.

Indeed, the cockatoo was breathtaking in her beauty. Her feathers were a subtle pink, blending into saffron on the undersides of her wings. Her crowning feature, though, literally was a long, salmon-colored crest, arching backwards from her ceres to below her nape. When aroused or curious, the cockatoo would puff up all her feathers and raise the crest, thereby doing a fair imitation of a saffron rose in bloom.

The old man lived with his one son although, unlike his father, the boy did not much care for the animals on the farm. He was into his music and especially the recent advances in technology. Many hours were spent watching tapes on his VCR or experimenting with his digital camera, which he had received as a birthday present. But as the son became more and more involved with computers and technology, he lost much of his *joie de vivre* and slowly became more angry and belligerent with age.

In contrast, whereas his father grew old, his days were nonetheless fulfilled through the joy imparted by his animals. One day, his ears perked up when he thought he heard the characteristic squawks of cockatoos out in his paddock by the barn. Checking his cage, he noted that his own cockatoo was still there and clearly was not making the sounds, since she had closed her eyes and had one leg tucked into her ventral feathers (as cockatoos do when they sleep). The old man put on his boots and went out to the far end of the paddock where, to his amazement, he saw not one, but two cockatoos on a fencepost. They landed beside him on the ground, one a hen and the other a cockbird. Clearly these were not escapees (hand-raised birds which somehow gotten out of their cages) but rather, they were wild birds. And yet the old man knew that there were no such birds anywhere in this part of the country—in fact, on the whole continent. As they landed beside him, they raised their tall crests, indicating that they were curious and seemed to want to talk to him.

And the Man asked “Why do you come here to me?”. The first cockatoo opened its beak and what came out were no mere sounds, but clear words.

The hen said, “WE came to thank you for your love and protection of all living beings within your purview, and for the Respect you give us and all other animals around you.”

“All I was trying to do,” replied the Man, “was to thank you for the years of beauty and joy which your species, and many others, have provided to me over the years.”

The cockatoos flapped their wings, and replied, “Because of your love for us—a selfless love different from the usual love of a human for another human—we have come to be your guides on a long and special Journey.”

“To where?” asked the old Man worriedly.

“You will soon see,” they responded. “But do not be afraid.”

The old Man looked down quizzically at the cockatoos, amazed as always by their stately beauty. He sat down wearily and asked again: “Why do you favor me with your thanks, and the honor of escorting me on this Journey? There are so many other people that you could have chosen.”

“Because,” they assured him, “ you care about our plight in sharing this world with humans”

“I am happy if I have done good things in my small domain, but how can people help you in your larger struggle after I am gone?”

The cockbird said “Tell others to follow your example and not to discard or neglect us animals as if we were inferior creature—or even merchandise—to be used only to serve mankind, and then thrown away. We may be different but nonetheless, have intelligence and feelings and emotions just like you.” The cockatoo blinked his dark eyes and the Man could now appreciate the sorrow in their depths. The hen added: “See in us all that we are. We creature are not decoration, or products for your food or your fashions, or targets to be shot for your ‘sport.’ We too are complex and sentient beings. Man cannot perceive this unless there are others like you to show them the truth.”

The cockbird chimed in: “We need land and trees and oceans to survive to express the Essence of our Beings, the way the Creator intended. Mankind must leave us some of these before we perish. The Earth was given to be an Eden for all creatures. Humans were given stewardship and ‘dominion’, not ‘domination’,

over us. We must thrive in order that your children, and your children's children, can continue to live amongst us, and share in what we have to offer.”

The Man nodded, understanding and replied. “What else do we humans need to learn?”

The hen preened her long tail to its tip, and then answered. “You humans admire us, and find us beautiful, yet you put us in cages if we are birds, or in cement pools if we are mammals of the sea’ or in sterile zoos if we are elephants or big cats. If you MUST convert us to pets or put us on display for your entertainment, at the very least, give us proper space and provide us with adequate food, water, and things to interest us and divert our attention from the torture of the endless confinement. Above all, give us daily care and attention, for under these circumstances we come to both love and trust you unconditionally. But, in contrast, we will not understand your anger if you hit us, or abandon us, or if you leave us for long periods of time or give us away.”

The old Man shook his head in sadness. “You give voice to some of my own thoughts, but they are sadder coming from you.”

“That is why you are already more advanced in your Journey than most others, and why we have come to find you.”

“Tell me, please, what else do we humans need to see?”

“That we are special gifts to you. Our softness can lift the spirits of the aged. Our love can cure the depressed; our devotion can lighten the load of the lonely or autistic; and our beauty will dazzle you all if you will just take a moment to see how much more beautiful we are than any of Man’s own creations.”

“I understand,” the old Man said and he wiped tears from his wrinkled cheeks.

“Yes, we know.”

The cockatoos and the Man talked on like this through the night. What they did not know was that the old man’s son was experimenting with his digital videocam that evening. As he panned out across the landscape, he unknowing captured his father sitting there, until daylight faded into darkness and he was forced to stop filming. Eventually, discussions between the old Man and the cockatoos ended and morning broke, making the cockatoos glow almost like the sun itself.

They found the old Man, the next day, dead, leaning against a giant tree, with a sorrowful yet calm expression on his face. His eyes were open and the trace of a tear still lingered on his cheek (although some said later that this must only have been due to the morning dew condensing on his cooling skin). His hands were clasped as if in prayer. No one could figure out what had brought the man so far out in the field-- perhaps confusion or delirium, they speculated.

Years later, the old man’s son, while digging through some boxes in the attic, found the videotape which he had recorded the evening that his father had died. Out of curiosity, he put it into his VCR and pressed the ‘Play’ button. At first, meaningless scenes appeared, but then he began to make out the landscape at the back end of the paddock and something came into focus there in the distance. It was the tree under which his father had died. Hunching in front of the television set to get a better look, he could see his father sitting, and seeming to talk to what possibly were two large birds (although their images were very blurry to him), Even using the highest digital enhancement, he could still not discern the identity of these figures. In fact, all his newfangled equipment and

technology proved unable to bring into focus, in clear detail, the beauty and other qualities of these birds. The son therefore concluded that they must be two of his father's free-ranging chickens, rendered peach-colored by the glow of the setting sun's crepuscular hues (although some rogue observers were so bold as to point out a certain similarity to the old man's cockatoo).

When the son turned up the volume, he could hear some mumbling. Cocking his ear to the speaker, he could almost make out certain words, perhaps ones like "respect", "creation", "dignity" and "love", but he could not be sure. These words seemed to be coming from his father, but they were accompanied by other sounds which were not human. Rather, they sounded like squawks such as those which come naturally from parrots (although later, some observers dismissed the sounds as being merely the creaking of the door on the nearby tool shed).

But no one—above all, the son—had been able to explain on the day the man died, the presence of the single, unmistakable salmon-colored crest feather locked between the old Man's hands frozen in prayer, curved backwards like a rainbow arching from the Sky to Earth. As a light breeze, arose, it carried the feather upward, spiraling over the tall trees filled with softly peeping songbirds, and returned it Heavenward, from where it first had come.

Modified from *LaJoie*, Fall, 1999; pp. 42-46, and the *Pet Bird Report*, Issue #48---; pp. 72-74

“ Respect for Animals: The antidote for human arrogance and brutality” (S.M. ; 1999)