Migrating Birds Lead Author on Spiritual Journey

The Black Swan: Memory, Midlife, and Migration
Anne Batterson
Scribner

by Margaret Withey

A new adventure, a different challenge, a phenomenon to study—all these have called Anne Batterson ’76 to new experiences in the past. This time, observing the annual migration of birds, an event long found provocative by the author, leads to The Black Swan: Memory, Midlife, and Migration, a memoir of both a physically demanding journey and a personal search.

On an early morning run along the Rhode Island shore, Batterson watches as “two ropes of Canada geese swung through, their cries pealing through the morning.” She asks herself, “Why not just go? Like the birds. Try out their reality for a while. See what happens.” What happens is a solitary journey by blue Volkswagen bus, following the migration flyways.

Although at one level The Black Swan is a journey story, it is primarily Batterson’s opportunity, at age 56, to reflect extensively on time, solitude, loneliness, aging, and purposelessness as well as on joy and exhilaration. In following the bird paths, she feels herself stepping “out of clock time” and responding to an ancient timeless call. “A wild bird lives inside me,” she confides. Often, she observes, in her “exuberance for flight,” she has looked not only for the next challenge but also for an answer to the persistent question and human dilemma, “Why, why, why do we have so much trouble figuring out what we are supposed to be doing? Why the endless choices every day?” Birds, in contrast, have a “script for living and perhaps for dying.” For Batterson, the life passage signaled by retirement suggests that “there is no time. It’s almost over,” and this she rejects. Her answer to the unease of inactivity is to begin a new adventure.

The framework of Batterson’s memoir is a five-week solitary journey following the migratory paths of birds and visiting the hot spots on the migration highways. At the sight of thousands of birds in flight at the Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Management Area, she writes that “nothing had prepared me for this prehistoric pageant in central Kansas.” At a Colorado marsh, she thrills to the sight of the sand hill cranes, spiraling up against afternoon clouds, resembling “ink drawings on a marble parchment.” Individual birds also take on importance. The image of a great blue heron, a bird associated with regeneration, appears and reappears throughout her narrative. Having sighted the exotic black swan of the book’s title on a pond in Avon, Conn., before her journey, Batterson orchestrates the bird’s rescue after her return.

The author draws upon life experiences past and present, loved ones, and people met along the way to build her story. Her observations of immediate experiences are interwoven with the larger implications of following the autumn migration. Central to her story are her family relationships, especially her marriage to David Owen, an Episcopal priest of whom she writes often, always with love and respect. She interrupts her trip to introduce us to her adult daughters, and to visit her marriage to David Owen, an Episcopal priest of whom she writes often, always with love and respect. She interrupts her trip to introduce us to her adult daughters, and to visit friends from her past who have remained significant in the present. We learn the importance of her childhood growing up with her two brothers and one sister, and of her adult life as a wife and mother.

Batterson’s unusual education is an amalgam of academic and practical learning, both structured and informal, and adventure. The Black Swan draws upon her experiences as a national and international skydiving champion, a charter pilot, and a flight instructor for exemplary episodes. A lifelong environmentalist, she became a guide in Nepal for Above the Clouds, an environmentally sensitive trekking business. “This is the way I learn, by experiencing,” she writes. “Words, those of others as well as my own, have never been enough for me.” She has studied Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism and says she is a Dalai Lama groupie. Even readers who are not inveterate adventurers or followers of Buddha, however, will find her themes familiar.

Returning to college in her 30s, Batterson graduated in 1976 from the University of Hartford. She later became an adjunct faculty member, teaching humanities, writing, and literature courses from the late 1970s through the late 1990s. In October 2001, she returned to campus on two occasions. On Oct. 4, she gave a talk and reading for the President’s College visiting authors series and on Oct. 23, she was honored at a luncheon at the 1877 Club. She describes her homecomings with affection. “I have had warm ties to the University, and it was nice to come back in another way,” she says, referring to seeing faculty members from both the English and humanities departments again and meeting the interesting students who attended the two events.

Batterson and her husband recently spent several months in Nebraska. Owen is carrying out a “photography and writing project in the sandhills of Nebraska,” and she is continuing her work on a book based on her experiences in Nepal. The working title of her book-in-progress is Into the Mandala, in which, as in The Black Swan, she will explore ideas while recounting adventures. One concept that she hopes to examine is the gap between “how other cultures view the world and the assumptions...”
that we as Westerners carry with us.” As travelers, Westerners are apt to find daunting “the gap between glossy adventure brochures and the reality of a third-world country.”

For Batterson, experiences like following the migration of birds, trekking in Nepal, free-falling through a cloud, or discovering an exotic black swan on a pond in Avon continue to assure her that “the truly extraordinary is always quickening on the far side of the ordinary.” Never one to rest on her laurels, she is thinking about another trip, perhaps beyond the Arctic Circle.

Communication as a Transformative Force

Crafting Society: Ethnicity, Class, and Communication Theory
Donald G. Ellis
Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.
by Diana Simonds

For University of Hartford Prof. Donald G. Ellis, communication is not the most important thing. It is the only thing. For Ellis, communication, at its worst, is responsible for the major fault lines in society; at its best, it can be potentially transformative, even between groups as opposed to each other as Israelis and Palestinians.

Communication, language, and discourse have been central to Ellis’s scholarly research, and his fifth book, Crafting Society: Ethnicity, Class, and Communication Theory, brings together a number of ideas that have been “bubbling around in my head for the past few years,” he writes in the preface. The most theoretical aspects of the book focus on the nature of the connections between specific communication patterns and more general social conditions.

Exploring how people construct their social worlds through communication, he maintains that such concepts as “society” and “ethnicity” are really just terms we use for certain patterns of communication. One’s attitudes, ideologies, and biases all influence how one represents oneself in both the spoken and written word.

Of equal importance, and a major issue addressed more concretely in the book, is the impact of modern media, especially electronic media, on one’s consciousness and on society as a whole. Expanding on the principles of medium theory that were first expounded by Marshall McLuhan and others, Ellis shows how modern media are responsible for many of the political schisms and societal problems in the world today. “Modern electronic media create a powerful sense of verisimilitude,” Ellis writes, “such that we experience what is called the ‘distant present’; that is, even though messages are complex, sophisticated results of high technology and planning, they appear to be natural, real, and occurring in real time. Feelings, identifications, images, empathic rapport, and emotional responses are all heightened because of the ability to create isolated senses of reality.”

Much of the book was completed on Ellis’s sabbatical leave in Israel, during which he and Ifat Maoz of Hebrew University in Jerusalem collaborated on a project to promote the peaceful co-existence of Israeli and Palestinian high school students through better communication and understanding. Ellis was able to study communication between the two combatant sides in one of today’s most politically volatile situations. It seems that each side in the Israeli-Palestinian debate perceives that which divides them—their severe conflicts about land, culture, history, and rights—as so fundamental that no compromise is possible. Ellis calls this “going to ground,” and Israelis and Palestinians get to this point immediately when they communicate. The results, as we see every day in the news, can be catastrophic.

Argument, one of the essential tools of conflict, according to Ellis, involves both groups managing their rhetorical devices to convey their versions of reality. In this way, those on each side manage the dilemmas of blame and appearance of bias and shield themselves from counterargument.

Ellis and his colleague from Hebrew University studied arguments in Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian encounter groups, drawing on traditions of conversation analysis, discourse analysis, logic, and rhetoric. A particular dilemma for Israeli Jews is to reconcile their liberal social attitudes with their hostility to Palestinians. Ellis says they accomplish this through “symbolic ethnocentrism,” in which they can express these feelings in an acceptable manner. Another dilemma faced by an arguer on either side is that the individual must portray one reality while at the same time successfully challenging the other. This is accomplished by posing questions, limiting the topics, and bringing in “hypothetical others” for support. Finally, the two sides go to what each considers “ground,” and the argument can go no further. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the grounded issues almost always involve those that each side considers sacred.

When two sides of a conflict are so fundamentally opposed, the challenge is to get them beyond their grounded positions through transformational communication that leads to change and, ultimately, a new reality. Ellis says this is the only hope for resolving a conflict that seems to grow more hopeless every day.