

By Carolyn Raffensperger

## A Time To Reap What We Have Sown

*"God did not make this world in jest; no, nor in indifference. These migrating sparrows all bear messages that concern my life."*— Henry David Thoreau *Journal*, Volume III, March 31, 1852

A large bat flew over our heads last Thursday night, the eve of my husband's diagnosis for cancer. I had not seen a bat in North Dakota during the five years I've lived here. Illinois, my natal home, yes. Washington, D.C., Yes. In those places, lots of bats swirled at dusk echolocating dinner.

This North Dakota bat offered great comfort, simply by her presence.

I have had a terror of bats for years. When I worked as an archaeologist in the desert Southwest, I often took tents to camp in Grand Gulch or Bridges National Monument just because I didn't like bats getting too close. This terror served me well.

Some years ago I was one of three commissioners charged with determining whether a radioactive waste facility was safe to site. We had held quasi-judicial hearings that lasted for months and cost millions of dollars. As the vote approached, I knew that no matter what I did, the choice was impossible. One night, days before the last hearing and the final vote, I dreamed that I was in a holy place waving streamers of light both to keep three angels from getting any closer but also, paradoxically, to draw them nearer. The 10-foot-tall angels, dressed in black, landed near me. Their wings were those of bats, long bones with a translucent brown webbing. They

spoke words of comfort and upon awakening I knew that I would have the courage to make the right choice about the radioactive waste facility.

The bat-angels were evocative of the three Strangers that visited Abraham and bargained with him about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But they also told him that he and Sarah would have a baby. The bat-angels had power because I was afraid of them. As the hymn *Amazing Grace* tells us, " 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear. And grace my fears relieved."

It was not an accident or coincidence that the first bat I saw in North Dakota appeared in this time of crisis over cancer. Nor is it the first time in the past weeks that the earth has engaged in this kind of call and response.

Just weeks ago my grandmother died. Thus I was full of sorrow during the spring migration of birds. One Sunday morning I walked out and saw a bird I had never seen before. She stood and faced me for a long time. Two brown bands around her throat. A

quantities of dioxin, PCBs, and other airborne chlorinated compounds don't stop at the border of our farm — or at the boundary of his body. Nor do the pesticides that he used when he was a tender boy necessarily reach a biological truce with the older man.

Do you know the story of the Spanish explorer Hernando Cortez when he reached Tenochtitlan — what is now Mexico City? According to the nature writer Barry Lopez, Cortez and his soldiers were awed and delighted by the gardens, canals, and aviaries that filled the city. Neither Paris nor London had aviaries that could match those of Mexico City. Egrets, parrots, wrens, accipiters, brooding condors, and hummingbirds filled them. Then, Lopez says, "In a move calculated to humiliate and frighten the Mexican people, Cortez set fire to the aviaries."

Five hundred years after Cortez, North Dakota has approved an avicide designed to kill yellow-headed and red-winged blackbirds because they eat too many of the farmers' sunflow-

snow-white breast. I raced for my bird book. A killdeer! I saw her as if for the first time. Yet this is a bird I know well — the archetypal mothering bird.

My husband does have cancer.

He had recently written a paper about the thorny problem of certifying organic farms but not the wild areas around them. His point was that we don't have pristine little enclaves in the middle of this toxic soup we've created out of our world. Yes, he and I farm 3,500 acres organically and have done so for 25 years this summer. But the millions of pounds of herbicides, insecticides, and avicides used on the Great Plains and the vast

ers — the ones that you put on your salad at the fanciest salad bars.

I have dedicated my life to serving and protecting the earth. My husband's cancer is another lesson in why I do that. The great comfort is that the earth gives back. The sparrows, the bats, the killdeers, and all the other Beings call and respond, call and respond. They don't screen out our pain and sorrows anymore than we can screen out the polluted world. This is very good.

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