

The Birds (2)

by Jack Swenson

One morning this week I went outside, and the birds were eating the house. A jay was making a racket on the roof. He hopped down, and when he saw me, he flew off with an angry squawk. The jays were unhappy because they hadn't been fed. My wife feeds them shelled peanuts, which she gets in five-pound bags from a discount grocery store, but that morning she was still in bed. She sleeps late unless she has to be at work, and that day she was playing hooky.

An hour later, I found her on the porch behind the house, drinking a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette. The birds were stacked up in the branches of a pine tree behind the feeder. Several were sitting on the fence. "They're massing," she said.

The cats have been acting strangely, too. Last week Spot got into a fight with a stray and got the worst of it. Spot doesn't like to fight. Afterward he moped around the house for several days. He wasn't injured, but his feelings were hurt.

Spot's a slow learner. Yesterday morning he picked a fight with another cat, one of several strays that we regularly feed, but my wife stepped in and stopped the brawl before it got started. Spot returned to the house with an indignant swagger. When he came inside, he was shedding hair in clouds.

The raccoons are ornery, too. At night, our backyard is a zoo. Raccoons and skunks are regular visitors; occasionally there's an opossum or fox. It's the baby raccoons that are rowdy. The youngsters growl and bump each other. They knock against the glass door as we sit reading or watching television in the family room. They eat the leftover kibble that we put out for the stray cats, and they want more, but more is never enough.

There's a law in this city that requires that dogs be on a leash when their owners are walking them, but there's always some yahoo who ignores the ordinance. The other day I was sitting on the steps in front of my house playing with a neighbor's cat when a man walked by with a dog at his heels. The dog, which was not on a

leash, saw the cat and veered off the sidewalk and into the yard. I jumped to my feet. "Get out of here!" I yelled at the dog, and the dog retreated. The man continued walking. "Hey," I shouted after the man, "Put that dog on a leash!"

It bothers me when I get angry over nothing. Why was I so quick to anger, I asked myself? My friends in the Juice Church would say it was self-will run riot. When things don't go our way, we get mad. Maybe so, I thought. Or maybe there's something more to it than that. And I thought about something else I once heard at a meeting, that anger is a way of avoiding the truth.

So what truth was I avoiding? Was it fear or an even more terrible sadness that this time set the kindling ablaze?

This morning I was the late riser. I had been up the night before until one a.m. My wife was in the kitchen. "There was an owl in the walnut tree this morning," she reported. "The jays are nowhere to be seen."

Thank God, I thought. I was beginning to think it was Bodega Bay all over again.

My wife and I have different explanations for why the animals have been acting crazy. My wife says maybe there's going to be an earthquake. My opinion is that it has something to do with the skunks. Last spring some skunks got into the crawlspace below one of the houses in our neighborhood, and the people who live there had them dispatched. It would have been simpler and easier to drop a rag soaked in ammonia into the crawlspace, and when the skunks exited, repair or replace the vent through which the animals were getting in. You can get a new vent for a buck in a hardware store.

Things like that don't go unnoticed in the animal kingdom. Wantonly taking the life of an animal is grievous sin. And if there's one thing that I know in this life it's that we pay for our sins.

Maybe the neighbor's house will burn down, and then peace and harmony will be restored to my little world.

Or maybe the animals have had it with us finally. Maybe they're going to get back at the human race for all the cruelty, the carelessness and neglect.

I know we shouldn't feed the raccoons or skunks. It isn't good for them. They have to survive in the wild on their own. But it comforts me to recall that I gave them an extra bowl last night. I put out the food as a distraction so that Shorty, one of our stray cat visitors who showed up at midnight, could eat his kibble in peace.

