

Little Bird Park

by Richard Wildermann

It was a sunny but brisk Saturday morning in mid-September when I saw a young lad sitting on one of the benches by the pond. He could have been eleven or twelve. It was unusual to see a child alone at the park, especially so early, just after sunrise. He must have been cold, sitting quietly, focused on his phone, wearing just jeans, a well-worn t-shirt, and a Yankees baseball cap. There were a few intrepid joggers heading down the nature trail, but it was too early for the moms and dads to be coming with their young ones in strollers. The boy had the park mostly to himself, except for me and the rest of the park's permanent or seasonal residents.

The boy looked sad. I was curious, so I decided, as the park's unofficial gatekeeper, to introduce myself. I flew over and perched on the back of the bench, as far from him as possible. He didn't look up, at least not at me. Occasionally he would raise his head, stare at the ducks in the pond or into the woods, take a deep breath, then go back to deftly tapping his phone with both thumbs.

I gave a couple chirps, thinking that would get his attention. He glanced over briefly but seemed unaware of my presence. Trying to communicate with humans can be infuriating, even for me, a loquacious black-capped chickadee. I can chat up a storm with my fellow chickadees and even manage to sort things out with other birds, as long as we throw in lots of body language. But humans? It's nearly impossible to get them to pause, listen, and then respond thoughtfully. Maybe it's a species thing, but more and more I see them riveted to their cell phones or gazing blankly ahead with earphones plugged in rather than engaging with their companions or basking in nature's harmonious music.

The sad boy sat on the bench for a good while. Then as more people began trickling into the park, he rose and slowly walked up Cedar Street until he was out of sight. I wondered if he'd return.

Early the next morning he was back on the bench. It was the weekend, so that explains why he wasn't getting ready for school. But why was he coming here, and why alone? Being inquisitive by nature, I decided to watch him for a while. I had already started the day with a breakfast of assorted insects, so I had some time to spare. Like yesterday, he was the only one on the bench, and I nonchalantly perched on my spot on the opposite end.

I offered up my traditional twee-dee-dee greeting to get his attention. He looked up, "*Hi, little bird.*" There it was. We connected for the first time. Moments later he put his phone down and looked out at the pond. A few mallard ducks bobbed on the surface, anticipating another busy Sunday as families came to enjoy a few pleasant hours before heading back to work and school the next day. Several pesky Canada geese strutted along the water's edge as if they owned the place.

Sundays are the busiest day of the week at my park. As the sun dried the morning air, walkers, runners, and a few bikers began making their way down the nature trail. When a lady approached the bench with an infant asleep in a baby carrier, the baby's head nuzzled under mommy's chin, I flew to a nearby tree. As she sat on the bench, the boy got up, stuck his phone in his back pocket, and walked to the pond. He was of average height, slight but not skinny, a sweet face and thick, curly hair. He watched the ducks briefly, then walked the full perimeter of the pond, stopping at times to look off at some birds or the ever-present squirrels running and hopping hectically with no apparent purpose.

The mother with the baby had moved on, and as the boy headed back to his bench another woman approached from the park entrance. "*Kevin, there you are.*" He looked up and said softly, "*Hi, Mom.*" Now I knew his name: Kevin. Mom sat down next to him. "*Come have some breakfast; I'm making pancakes. You can come back here later.*" Kevin hesitated. "*But it's nice here now; quiet; not too many people.*" He paused, then continued: "*Didn't we used to come here when I was little?*" Mom smiled. "*We did. You'd be in the seat on the back of Dad's bike, and we'd ride along the trail.*" Kevin noticed me listening attentively from a nearby bush. "*That's my little bird friend. Sometimes she sits right here on the back of the bench.*" "*That's a chickadee,*" Mom said. "*They're very friendly. They'll eat seeds out of your hand, if you're patient.*" Oh, now this Mom I like. Kevin and Mom got up and began walking out of the park. Kevin turned and smiled at me: "*Bye, little bird, see you soon.*" That was the first time I saw him smile.

I saw Kevin again a few days later in late afternoon. Rather than sit on the bench, he walked to the nature trail and slowly disappeared around a curve. I spotted him coming back less than an hour later. I was struck by how different he looked from when I first met him less than a week ago. His expression was no longer forlorn but relaxed, even serene. Kevin sat on the bench and I quickly joined him. "*Hi, little bird,*" he smiled. "*Today's Wednesday, no soccer practice.*" He reached in his pocket, held his arm out,

opened his fist, and proudly offered me sunflower seeds. I landed on his fingertips, picked up a seed, flew back to my spot on the bench, and expertly pecked it open while holding it down with my feet.

“I forgot about the trail from when I was little,” he said, looking over at me. *“It’s really nice now; the leaves are turning different colors.”* Kevin talked on for a minute or two, about how the foliage looks different where the trail is open by the creek than in the wooded areas where the sunlight streaks through the trees. We’ve had a good number of sunny days for weeks, which everyone enjoys in our little southern New England town. And the nights have been cool but not freezing, so there’s a good chance the red and sugar maples in open areas will turn that brilliant scarlet color. Other oaks in shady spots, along with the black birches, will add yellow and orange to the display. The variations of darker red leaves on the majestic white oaks appear a little later, prolonging nature’s beautiful autumn offering.

As Kevin left the park, I thought about the change I’d seen come over him in such a short time. Humans’ place in nature is complicated. They fail to understand that they have more than just a relationship with nature; they are part of nature. At least they were; they’ve lost that link. At some point in their evolution they disconnected. Thousands of years ago, humans, like lions and hawks and sharks, hunted other animals for food. They subsisted on what was available. Then fate intervened and they began transforming the natural world. They started raising animals molded and nurtured solely to be consumed. They went from gathering native plants for food to growing cultivated crops on ever-expanding swaths of land isolated from and incompatible with the diverse collection of life they have displaced.

Humans gradually came to view nature as something apart, something to experience, to exploit and consume. The natural world became a commodity to be controlled, manipulated, and transformed solely for their benefit. The interconnected pieces of nature became mere objects, things available for one purpose, to make humans more physically comfortable, more attached to their own creations and, as a result, less aware of the living Earth from which they came.

Human detachment from the natural world may bring them creature comforts but it also has led to emotional problems, including for children. Rapid heating of the air and water has jolted the planet’s rhythms and balance to an extent that may soon have irrevocable, calamitous consequences for virtually all living things. Young people are frightened and angry. Frightened by an Earth struggling to breathe. Angry at adults for

their pious words and pathetic failure to bring about meaningful action to reduce greenhouse gases.

Simply observing the natural world reduces stress by providing comfort, peace, sustenance, and joy. Humans have an opportunity to gain from the healing power of nature, and at the same time they can help nourish and restore it. If they reconnect with Earth, humans will truly have come home.

Kevin was back first thing Saturday morning. He headed straight for the nature trail, once again sharing it with only a few other souls at this early hour. I was waiting on the bench when he returned and sat down in his usual spot. He glanced at me and said, *"I can't stay long today, got a soccer game; Mom's picking me up soon."* He looked out to the trail entrance and added, *"I heard an owl today but couldn't see it in the trees."*

When his Mom arrived, Kevin must have been thinking about his walk. He told her, *"Mrs. O'Shea said my science paper can be about how trees help keep the air from warming up so much."* Mom smiled at him, *"That's wonderful, Kevin. It's so important."* Kevin sat pensively for a minute, looking out at the pond. *"Do chickadees stay here all winter?"* he asked. Mom hesitated, then ventured, *"I think so, but let's look it up when we get home."*

As they walked away that fine Saturday morning, Kevin turned to her, *"Mom, can we put a bird feeder in the backyard?"*

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