

Hatching Miracles

Life is made of tough and tender moments: hope and disappointment, grief and celebration. Is there any better symbol of life's strength and fragility than an ordinary egg?

Nothing is easier to break. Probably all of us have noticed scattered blue fragments of robin's eggs that litter so many backyards in the spring. Eggs have to be easy to crack apart and the shell can't be too thick, because the tiny bird inside needs to be able to peck its way out when the time is right. But the egg also has to be strong and resilient to protect the growing chick.

Some years back the headmaster of a school in England decided to determine just how much rough handling an egg could withstand. He asked the local fire department to drop raw eggs onto the lawn from the top of a seventy foot ladder. Seven out of ten survived the fall. An officer from the Royal Air Force arranged for a helicopter to drop more eggs from a height of one hundred and fifty feet down onto the school's green. Only three out of eighteen shattered from the plunge. Then a local newspaper hired a Piper Aztec to dive bomb an airfield with five dozen eggs traveling at 150 miles per hour. Over half survived the strafing. And it's encouraging, at least to me, who's always on the lookout for small miracles, to know that your average grade-A egg can withstand an aerial bombardment. It tells me that life is delicate and perishable, but also made of pretty durable stuff.

Along with eggs, there are nests, which you can find almost everywhere there are trees, and even where there aren't trees. One house wren built her nest in the pocket of an old scarecrow, and another inside the rear axle of a car that actually got driven (and the egg still hatched). A black-chinned hummingbird who lived in an orange grove in California built her one-inch high, cup-shaped nest right on

top of an orange! As Barbara Dunning explains in her book *Secrets of Nests*, the whole idea of nesting is downright astonishing when you think about it.

“We have this funny little animal,” she reflects, “walking or hopping along on two feet, with its hands essentially tied behind its back, the survival of its species depending on how well it can protect and keep warm a ridiculous, round, roly, fragile thing, containing its future offspring.” As part of her research, the author tried caring for an egg on her kitchen floor, pushing it around with her nose. “I heard foxes in the living room, snakes in the broom closet, raccoons sneaking around in the cabinets, behind the cereal boxes,” she remembered. Given the nature of the threats and the flimsiness of the defenses, it’s a wonder that any birds survive at all. But the marvel is that robins and bluejays and chickadees return every spring to start new families and build new homes.

And consider the nestlings and fledglings. How amazing that the tiny, naked and helpless baby birds are ready in the space of two short weeks to spread their wings and fly. Between the time he or she peeps out of the shell and puts on his flight feathers, a baby robin will need to be fed the equivalent of fourteen feet of earthworms every day. And that’s the reason momma and poppa look so busy. They are in the transformation business, gathering the three pounds of slippery, slimy-but-satisfying night crawlers that will be mysteriously converted into one new robin red-breast ready to take flight.

There’s a change that takes place. Something that wriggles and burrows through the dark soil becomes a chorister in the treetops, trilling to the sunlight. And how it happens is fantastic. Life is incredible; birth is phenomenal. “Black earth turned to yellow crocus,” says a poet, “is undiluted hocus-pocus.” And how all that magic fits together can be quite interesting, especially for a child.

Jane Goodall recalls visiting her grandmother’s farm as a four-year-old, where one of her daily tasks was to collect eggs from the hen house. “As the days

passed,” she recalled, “I became more and more puzzled. Where on a chick was there an opening big enough for an egg to come out?” Apparently no one had explained the birds and bees, so the little girl decided to investigate. “I followed a hen into one of the little wooden hen houses—but of course, as I crawled after her she gave horrified squawks and hurriedly left. My young brain must have then worked out that I would have to be there first. So I crawled into another hen house and waited, hoping a hen would come in to lay. And there I remained, crouched in silence in one corner, concealed in some straw, waiting.

At last a hen came in, scratched about in the straw, and settled herself on her makeshift nest just in front of me. I must have kept very still or she would have been disturbed. Presently the hen half stood and I saw a round white object gradually protruding from the feathers between her legs. Suddenly with a plop, the egg landed on the straw.”

Filled with excitement, Jane ran home to inform her mother of her discovery. But the little girl had been inside the chicken coop almost four hours. No one knew where Jane had disappeared. Her worried mom even called the police to report the youngster missing. But when Jane rushed inside, her mother wasn’t angry and didn’t scold. She could see her daughter’s bright shining eyes and sense her breathless enthusiasm as she sat down to listen to the story of how a hen lays an egg.

Spring is the season for miracle tales. Christians tell how Jesus rose from the grave, while Jews relate the legend of how their ancestors walked through the Red Sea escaping to their promised land. Believers who are “born again” speak of renewal in terms of conversion (or in Greek “metanoia”). That’s the New Testament term Paul uses in his letter to the Romans, where he tells them, “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds.” Be a non-conformist! Don’t buy into the conventional definitions of success or happiness. And he follows that advice right up with a description of what a deep,

inner metanoia looks like: love one another, practice hospitality, repudiate evil, hold fast to that which is good. Feed the hungry, give to the poor. Realize that we are all members of one great body. What he's talking about here is human solidarity, planetary consciousness, merging our separate identities into an ecological awareness of cosmic interdependence. And when we have been transformed or converted on that profound level, then we start to see miracles everywhere: peepers in the wetlands and sap rising in the maples. Turning worms into songbirds, or caterpillars into butterflies, or tadpoles into bullfrogs, these are natural conversion experiences. There are everyday miracles in a mother's love and the curiosity of little children. Probably there are prodigies in your own backyard.

My backyard in New England, for instance, was where our chickens used to live. I like to say that we had poultry before it was cool. We never ate our birds. We rescued them as chicks from the farm store where they were living in a metal water trough and being pecked by the bigger fowl. I built a coop from re-cycled wood and, at least before I became a vegan, that's where we got our eggs.

Growing up, I'd always assumed that eggs came from the grocery store. That was obviously what the children in my congregation believed, too, on the Easter Sunday that I decided to bring a hen to church. Believe me, it's humiliating for a preacher like me to be upstaged by a chicken. As the youngsters gathered round the parakeet cage where our Rhode Island Red rested upon the chancel, I explained that eggs didn't just come from bunnies. They also came from flocks like mine. And though our chickens weren't exactly pets, I informed them, our birds did have names: Gobbledy-gook and Fred, Faith, Hope and Charity! (When she wasn't moulting, you see, Hope was the thing with feathers!) Seldom have I seen any children more excited or wide-eyed. Most had probably never seen a real, live chicken before. None of them knew that the in Luke and Matthew, the Gospels liken God's love to the protection a mother hen offers to her baby chicks, a wonderful image of the feminine divine. But I have no doubt the kids

rejoiced in the ever-loving mystery of life that morning, as I came to experience most every day.

Heading out to the coop was my first item of business each morning. And I never failed to get a thrill each time I open the laying box and see that my birds had managed to do it one more time. I traded them cracked corn and fresh water and they provided me with omelets. I couldn't lay an egg in a hundred million years. All I can do is say, "Thank you, you're amazing," and "It's a miracle."