

Something Happened On Lake Mooselookmeguntic

A summer's evening, 2008. A loon is swimming on Lake Mooselookmeguntic in Western Maine. He is unable to fish. Unable to eat. His beak is closed, shut tight by an entanglement of fishing line.

Nearby, Allan Brown, a summer resident at the lake, is kayaking towards his dock. He notices the loon swimming in his direction. He stops paddling and sits quietly, watching, waiting for it to pass. At this point he doesn't realize that the loon is in trouble, so he does what he always does when spotting a loon; he talks to it.

You might ask why Allan's first reaction would be to talk to the loon. But, if you've ever lain awake at night listening to a chorus of loons calling out to each other from lake to lake over mountains and meadows, or if you've ever heard them wail or yodel or hoot among themselves in daylight, it would be easier to understand. Simply put, loons are verbal and seem to invite conversation.

Barbara Ulman, an acquaintance of Allan's, and a summertime resident at neighboring Rangeley Lake, talks to the loons all the time. "They communicate with each other day and night," she said. "All over the lake, even from lake to lake." When she encounters them on the lake she feels it's the most natural thing to react verbally. "I'll say things like, Hello brother. Hello sister. You're beautiful," she said. "Things like that."

This loon mystique is well illustrated in the film *On Golden Pond*. When the elderly couple, Ethel and Norman Thayer, arrive at their lakeside summer home, first thing, Ethel goes to the lake to say hello to the loons. Saying goodbye is the last thing Ethel and Norman do before leaving. And there's lots of loon talk in between their arrival and departure. It might seem an exaggeration or an overblown dramatic effect. But it appears that's what lake people do.

But let's get back to what Allan calls his *tangled loon* story. Mind you, I didn't observe this directly. I heard it first from Barbara and then read Allan's account of what happened that evening when he came across the loon swimming near his dock.

So, there sits Allan, watching the loon. But instead of swimming past, as Allan anticipates he would, the loon approaches the kayak. Only then does Allan become aware of something dangling from its beak. His first thought is, *nesting material*. But on closer inspection he realizes it is fishing line.

“I took a small stroke and paddled towards the loon,” wrote Allan in his personal account of his experience. “But the loon turned and swam away.” Allan’s description of what followed brings to mind a graceful impromptu dance choreographed between him and the loon as they learned about each other: After the loon turned away, Allan did the same. Then both turned back and met in the middle. Loon dove, but quickly resurfaced. Allan turned and, finally, the loon allowed him to glide beside it. As they floated side by side, Allan talked quietly to the loon. He reached down and placed his hand on the loon’s head.

There is something innately calming in a gentle touch and a soothing voice, apparently even for wild creatures. When Allan crossed over the line from hands off to hands on, the loon remained calm and didn’t struggle. Allan had the freedom to fiddle around as he tried to remove the line from the loon’s beak, but to no avail. After fifteen minutes Allan realized he had done all he could. The line was caught around the spike-like projection on the lower portion of the loon’s beak, which, Allan would later learn, was a tool used by the loon as an aid in catching fish.

When I heard Allan’s story, I was reminded of something that happened to me about ten years ago, and I was struck by the parallels in our experiences. I had recently relocated from the city to a small mountain community outside Yosemite National Park. One morning, a robin slammed into my living room window and fell to the ground. He must have been flying at a rapid pace, because the impact knocked him out. He lay unconscious, breathing rapidly.

When he failed to come around after several minutes, I picked him up and carried him into the house. I laid him in a box with some water and bird seed, and left him, sequestered in a spare bedroom. When I came back an hour later, he was awake. I approached the box. He became agitated and made

awkward movements as he tried to fly. But he could not. One wing and one leg appeared to be injured. I began to talk to him quietly. Slowly I reached out with a finger and rubbed his head gently. He stopped struggling and did not move. Then I picked him up and felt along his body, along his wings, and his legs, all the time talking gently, telling him he was going to be all right. I can still feel his warm body, relaxed and calm, his little heart beating rapidly under my hand.

The robin stayed with me for four days. Every day he became stronger and livelier. Every day I held him and talked to him. Eventually I took him out of the box, in order to give him a chance to move around. On the third day, when I entered the room I found him sitting on the windowsill looking outside. He had obviously flown up there. Perhaps he was getting ready to leave. I removed the window screen and left him sitting on the sill. When I came back several minutes later, he was still there.

I wonder, what would prompt a loon to trust a man in a kayak? What would cause a robin to hold off his escape through an open window? Is it that these birds somehow knew they were dependent on us, their care-givers? Did they sense that they couldn't make it on their own?

Allan wrote in an email that he believes the loon felt calm because, when they looked into each other's eyes, they communicated and connected. Loons have red eyes, deep and penetrating. So it's easy to understand the power that Allan felt when he gazed into them. But I don't remember having looked into the robin's eyes. And yet something passed between us, and I was somehow able to gain his trust.

So, it would have to be more than a sincere look, or even a calming voice or a light touch that passes between two dissimilar beings and creates a connection. Could there be some kind of a universal communication that sets up a bond, one that holds one party to the promise of delivering safety and one that allows the other to lock into the agreement and give itself over to the relationship? Allan is certain that the loon understood his words. "Something internal happened," he said, "a trust we both accepted was built, as if we were saying to each other, come on, let's work this out."

In one-to-one human contact trust can be born of intimacy and volition and can bring the greatest happiness and contentment. But human trust can also bring the depths of despair, if broken. In either case, the trust and emotion are deep and long-lasting. "I do." What a powerful declaration. Yes, it says. We will trust each other all our lives. Entire lives are built around those two simple words. What a responsibility. Is it only the human being that is capable of that level of connection? Who knows what an animal feels, what it remembers?

My robin, after working his way out of the box, spent one more day with me, flying back and forth from the floor to the window sill. On the fourth day, when I entered the room, he was gone. I looked out the window and there he was, sitting on the limb of a cedar tree. He sat and looked in my direction for a few moments, and then he flew away.

Allan's loon had to go through a second vigil of trust after Allan was unable to untangle the fishing line on his own. As it turned out, a neighbor of Allan's had spotted him in his kayak. "He came towards me," wrote Allan, "realizing I needed some help, but thinking I had caught a fish. To his surprise, I had a loon." Allan asked his neighbor to get a scissors. He described what happened next. "I paddled one-handed to Jim's dock with the loon in the other hand swimming alongside the kayak. Jim returned with the scissors. I held its head while Jim clipped the final pieces of fishing line. When he was finished, I turned the loon toward open water and gently released it, and it swam off slowly. When the loon was 25 yards away he flapped his wings, raised his head and dived into the water. When the loon was gone, we just sat staring at each other. Did that really happen?"

So, what does the caregiver get out of the deal after the wild one has left?

A shared moment of disbelief. The stuff of journal entries and midnight musings. Things we tell our children and grandchildren when they ask tough questions about life and death, or when they refuse to kiss you goodnight, demanding just one more story before lights out. These are the images that remain imprinted in our minds, etched on our hearts. They have the power to change our world view, sometimes subtly, sometimes with drama.

For me, the robin's visit to my home changed me. I was a newcomer to the mountains, fresh from the city, when he slammed into my window. I was on my own, hadn't made many friends, and was still getting acquainted with the area. After the robin experience, I felt more a part of my surroundings, more connected to the natural world I had chosen for my home. I was a real mountain woman. No subtlety there!

As far as the loon experience is concerned, Allan says he often goes back and relives the event. "It is still a wow moment in my life," he wrote in a recent email. "It never gets old, just more cherished." He has noticed three loons that travel together around the lake. When the trio swims into the area around Allan's dock, "One lags behind," he wrote. "And he often approaches our dock and looks. It could be my imagination, but sometimes I feel like he is my tangled loon."

Unlike my robin episode, however, which, until now, remained with me as a private affair, the story of Allan's rescue of the loon on Lake Moselookmeggantic would come to travel across lakes in Maine, to California and who knows where else. Allan would write about it. His wife would publish a children's story based on the experience. The neighbors would pass the story around.

For Barbara, when she heard of Allan's rescue of the loon on Lake Moselookmeggantic, she knew immediately that something special had happened. "Put your hand on a loon? Move its head around?" was Barbara's reaction. "I mean loons don't let you do that. People don't let you do that."

Barbara has been spending her summers at Rangeley Lake since childhood, and loons have always been a special part of her experience there. "The first night we arrive at the lake," she explained, "we hear the loons, and I think, okay, I'm here." Barbara admires the loons' special traits. Their varied calls provide atmosphere during the day and haunting drama at night, a whole chorus of sounds, loons singing together. She admires their bright red eyes that complement the striking black and white checkerboard pattern of feathers that adorn its sleek black body. "They're just a gorgeous bird," she

said. “So if you see them close up from the canoe, it’s like, Wow! Look what’s there. We always have that reaction, no matter how many times we seem them.”

Barbara and her husband frequently travel by canoe on the lake, and the loons are not afraid when they come near. They’ll dive under water and then come up next to the canoe and swim alongside. “They are not fazed by what they see,” Barbara explained. “They don’t interact, but they don’t run away either.”

But Barbara’s connection to loons goes beyond their striking beauty, their voice and their social nature. About the time that Allan had his encounter with the loon, Barbara, while working with a shaman, discovered that her power animal, the one she most admires and would like to emulate – especially its ease with singing in public – is the loon. “At first it seemed strange to have the loon as a power animal,” Barbara admits. “But when you think about it, the loon is a powerful bird. It has a powerful song that people relate to. It’s large and can fly long, long distances.”

After she met Allan and heard the details of the tangled loon story, Barbara, like Allan and his wife, realized she had to tell people about it. And her way of telling people about things is to write music.

She began by transcribing loons calls onto her computer. The flute and clarinet seemed like the perfect choices for imitating these, and many of the calls appear in her piece. Armed with a poem written by a California friend, Barbara created a choral piece with piano, flute and clarinet accompaniment. In the summer of 2013, she organized a community choir, gathered her musician friends, and, to a packed house in a community church, *One Loon’s Afternoon*, was performed.

Now Allan’s tangled loon story will live on in the collective memory of that community. Perhaps children at the lake will look for the tangled loon as they learn to steer their canoes and kayaks. Perhaps one of these children will come across an animal in need of help and her innate sense of empathy will kick in. Perhaps she will remember the loon story and will speak gently and reach out calmly without

fear or trepidation. And perhaps this child will react in her uniquely human way and tell her story, make connections and philosophize. Perhaps she will wonder and analyze, try to figure things out. Thus will the story travel from generation to generation.

It may appear that I am implying that only humans are capable of empathic behavior. Far from it. I believe animals have an innate sense when one of them is in trouble. I have observed helping behaviors in animals. These appear to be motivated by empathy.

One situation happened between a cat and a kitten.

At one point in my life I was living with two cats – Mo, an adult cat of two, and Bella, a kitten of six months. Bella loved to chase after Mo. One night, she followed him up to our rooftop, somehow getting up easily. But when the time came for her to follow him down, she stood frozen, meowing as only a kitten in distress can. When Mo heard her, he turned around, scooted up an apple tree that butted up to the house, jumped from the tree to the roof, where Bella paced back and forth, jumped back onto the tree to show her how to get down. He did this three or four times, attempting to get her to follow him. But poor Bella was too terrified and never did seem to get the message. We finally had to rescue her with ladder and pillow case. As I watched Mo's seeming concern – empathy – for Bella, and his determination to get her down, I wondered what his motivation might be.

My conclusion was, and still is, that Mo was impelled by some inner instinct to care about and to understand when one of his mates was in trouble. I could think of no motivation other than pure empathy. Being human, I believe it is up to me to tell their story.