

I Load Rocks While Raven Rides the Wind

7,700 feet up east slope of the Rocky Mountains in northern Colorado, I hooked the blade behind the yellow tractor in morning sunshine on the ranch I took care of for the Girl Scouts.

Raven perched in a ponderosa pine tree that shared the slope above me with other ponderosas, fir trees, aspen trees, clumps of grass, and wild flowers. I turned and turned the roaring tractor, hooked protruding rocks with the corner of the blade, and pulled them from different angles until they skidded free on the road. I smoothed the road with the blade, climbed down, loaded rocks into the bucket on the front of the tractor, drove down the ranch, and dumped the rocks to fill low ground for a future parking area. Raven flew along, off to my left. Raven circled above me as I drove back. Raven sat in a pine tree and watched me smooth the road where I had pulled out rocks.

According to my reading, many Native Americans consider animals to be their equals. Animals and people talk to each other. Animals bring spiritual guidance and advise the people on practical matters. Raven is important in the theology of Native Americans of the plains as the trickster, one who tests the truth of what we consider to be reality, and as a spiritual advisor, as a guide to help the people know how to live their lives.

I don't know how man is seen in Raven's theology. I don't know how I am seen in Raven's theology, though I wouldn't be as close as I am to Raven were I not seen in a different light from those who shoot ravens at any opportunity, and there are still some of those on this mountain range.

Modern scientists are discovering through painstaking research what we who are too intuitive to give total credence to "the scientific method" have been telling them all along, that there is much more depth, spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, intuitively, in animals' existence than modern man, blinded by human chauvinism, has realized.

I finished smoothing the road and worked on other projects. When I worked and on my own time, I explored the mountain, the forest, the meadows and the tall ridges of granite. The girl scout ranch is bordered on the end farthest from the highway by National Forest that is closed to motorized vehicles. My family and I explored thousands of acres without ever seeing a vehicle.

We almost never saw another person. We saw many wild animals, bears, coyotes, rattlesnakes, garter snakes, marmots, beavers, deer, elk, birds of dozens of species, frogs, dragonflies, snails, cougars, bobcats, trees, grasses, fish, flowers, stones. I spent much of my off-work time far away from other people, looking at the Rocky Mountains from high places, wandering through the day. Sometimes my family or part of my family went with me.

I watched Raven. Raven watched me. I didn't know if Raven was male or female. John Terres, in *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*, says the female is smaller than the male, but I would have had to see them together to compare sizes, and I never did. I didn't know if it was always the same raven. I thought it was. From my reading, from intuitive knowledge, from watching the large, shiny, black bird, that showed iridescent sheens of green or purple in some angles of sunlight, I knew that it didn't matter if it was always the same raven. Ravens share closeness of community, interconnection of knowledge and function between individuals that can only be guessed at by even the most intuitive of humans.

Nights turned cold. Leaves turned red, yellow, and brown and fell to the ground. Grasses bleached yellow. Fall gave way to winter.

Snow fell on the Rocky Mountains. I plowed snow from the road I had smoothed early in summer. Snow plumed away from the blade, away from halogen headlights of the blue, one-ton truck when I plowed at night to stay ahead of snow drifting down densely. Snow thrown from the blade cascaded into moonlight when clouds blew away.

A white owl flew in moonlight at midnight and hunted the snow on meadows, briefly in my vision and gone again. Owls listen, hear motion beneath the snow, dive through the snow accumulated on the ground to catch prey they have located and identified by sound. I know this from reading, not from observation. I see and hear and smell and touch and taste all that I can. I supplement learning from my senses with reading. I sort through what I read to try to determine what part of it makes sense and accept much of it as truth.

Night's open sky drove the temperature below zero.

Dense clouds drifted down from mountain peaks. Snow blew against the house and stuck to our north windows. Wind sang of winter and woke me. As I woke, between densely falling flakes of snow, Raven flew upward outside my window, shining black wings into the wind, hoarsely croaked my name and laughed. In the moment when I emerged from dreams, Raven called out words, "Ride winter wind. Feed on

snowflakes. Breathe frozen air.” Raven laughed and flew into falling snow.

Early morning, I lay awake and watched snow falling by my window. I wondered if I remembered something that happened outside my window or something that I dreamed.

Laura, Amanda, and I ate breakfast. Juniper was in Illinois at college. Clouds cleared away, and the sun shone. I started the blue truck and plowed snow through intense sunlight and sunlight reflected from snow. From inside the truck, I didn't see as much of the sky and treetops, the green and grey and white and brown forest, meadows, and dramatic rock formations that surrounded me, but sometimes I saw Raven, still watching me.

Raven, flying calligrapher, wrote the meaning of winter, black against white snow.

I worked half time at that job. In winter, I inventoried all the scout's tools and supplies. I painted, cleaned, plumbed, waxed floors, refinished floors in the lodges. Groups of girls scouts came up from the cities with their adult leaders, and I acquainted them with the buildings, the ranch, helped them when they needed help. On my own time, I wrote essays, fiction, poetry, and songs. I played my guitar and sang. I walked in the winter, sometimes with Laura, my wife, with Juniper and Amanda, our daughters.

In our first years there, Amanda and Juniper continued their education at home, largely guided by their own interests but with me or Laura as teacher when they needed help. Juniper and Amanda both tried a year of public high school, to see what it was like, and then went to college far enough away that they only came home during vacations, often with friends they wanted to share their mountain and their family with. They came home summers and worked in the area.

Rocky Mountain spring wind blew down a ponderosa pine tree in tent site two, picked up a picnic table and slammed it against a tree, smashed the table into ragged chunks and sharp splinters. Wind blew a door off one of the latrines. Snow blew into drifts. Snow melted. New, green grass grew up through winter-bleached, snow-flattened grass.

Bluebirds flew through spring sunshine and nested in 100 birdhouses that girl scouts and other volunteers had built and girl scouts and I had worked together to put up on edges of small meadows all over the ranch. Flickers and wrens and robins flew and nested and sang.

A woodpecker hammered on the metal part of our chimney, delighted with what the human inhabitants of this small mountain valley had given him to increase the sounds that he made so proudly to impress females with what a strong woodpecker he was and how suited he was to carry on his

species. The loud, rapid sounds of hammered metal echoed across our small valley throughout the time of courting, too early in the morning for me, but what could I say to a woodpecker whose species was here long before mine, who owns these mountains much more than I do? I adjusted my schedule to his, got up while it was still dark, ate breakfast, and was outside, working, by the time he started his early hammering.

On my days off, we walked down the ranch, up through the granite ridge, through meadows and forest along Lone Pine Creek flowing down the mountain, all of us together, two or three at a time, or one walking alone.

Early on a cold spring morning, Amanda and I walked down the ranch to feed her black rabbit, Nildro-hain. White frost thick on the trees, thick on the catkins on the willows along the creek, white frost thick on new leaf buds. Thick white frost covered every stone of the granite ridge rising untamed from wild white forest. Beauty all around us of dense white frost. If I never saw this white, frozen, silent beauty without this depth of cold, then drive cold to my bones.

We saw the beginnings of life all around us beneath crystalline frosted leaf buds, beneath frosted catkins, beneath frosted new green needles. Stone crumbled to soil and cradled last autumn's seeds that sprouted to begin new life.

Sun broke through grey clouds above us and turned the landscape golden. A red-tailed hawk, gold in golden sunshine, soared high above us, above white frost, golden frost of the meadow.

We stopped. We were silent for a long time.

I heard our words, but I wasn't sure which of us spoke. My daughter and I were of one mind at that moment. "Was the moment of creation like this, cold, cradling the beginning of life, still with expectation, then warm, golden bright and beautiful, with life blossoming everywhere?"

Raven flew from treetop to treetop and watched us walk. Raven flew above us and croaked hoarse comments. Raven spoke or sang a wide variety of sounds. I listened, fascinated, but I didn't hear words in a language I understood. The large, shiny black bird often talked to me, and I should have understood what it said. I thought I missed something important because I didn't understand. If I lived a more basic existence, closer to the earth and to nature, if the world began to live in balance, I might begin to understand what Raven said.

In tent site two, I cut up the blown-down tree. My chain saw roared in spring breeze. The chain spun high speed, bounced a stream of wood particles from my trousers to the ground, cut through the tree. Sun shone. White clouds blew across blue sky.

I left some rounds from the tree in the camp site so girl scouts could sit on them around fires. I hauled some of the wood down to the woodshed by the big lodge and split the rounds with the splitter that I hooked up to the hydraulic system of the tractor. I stacked the split pieces of wood in the woodshed.

Pasque flowers grew profusely next to the road and through the forest. Pasque flowers cupped close to the ground toward the mountain sky and tried to decide the day. When sun shone through the clouds, the flowers opened gentle, fuzzy, lavender flowers. The clouds closed, and so did the flowers. Mountain ball cacti opened waxy pink flowers to changing spring weather among clumps of green and yellow grass. Wild odors drifted in spring breezes.

Small white flowers with yellow centers, close to the ground, bloomed, and pink mountain ball cactus flowers, with yellow centers, and tiny, light pink flowers tight against granite stone.

I could learn the flowers' names, not the names of types, pasque, mountain ball cactus, daisy, given by other lumbering-above-them humans, but individual names, soft, petally, of delicate smells, shy as spring sun behind densely blowing grey clouds. If I watched one flower open and close several days, if I sat through unsheltered spring nights with it, it would tell me its name, in odors, in motions of opening and closing dance, in humble attitudes saying one season's beauty, even unobserved, and seed for the future is enough to live for.

Human voices called me back to work from deep in my mind, and I left the flowers to dance to changing light. It was good that I worked, that I did the chores to keep the ranch in smooth operation, so it could be used and explored by hundreds of girl scouts who came up from the cities on some weekends in winter, for longer times in summer. It was good that I did the chores and kept the job that allowed my family to live on the mountain, to see the flowers, to see winter, spring, summer, autumn, to see the frost, to see the animals on the wild mountain, to watch Raven.

I attached a chain to the front bucket of the tractor, wrapped the chain around a new picnic table, lifted the table, and hauled it into tent site two. With insulated coveralls, leather mittens over wool mittens, insulated boots, silk socks under cotton socks under thick wool socks, I stayed warm in cold wind on the loud yellow tractor.

Clouds cleared away from the sun, and the wind dropped to a gentle breeze. The day warmed in sunshine. I peeled off insulated overalls and left them near the road to pick up on my way back. I took off my mittens and put on leather gloves. I gathered broken pieces of the wind-smashed table and piled

them near a fireplace. I reattached the door to the latrine and reinforced the fastenings with more metal screwed into dry, painted wood.

Raven wore nothing but shining black feathers, flew in the cold wind, sat in a treetop and watched me for a while, then flew by, scouting meadows and nearby rock formations. Small white flowers blossomed close against the ground around my feet as I worked..

On a warmer morning, Amanda and I walked from the house into sunshine and down the dirt road. Wind blew down the mountain, danced warm around us, and tried to push us from our chosen direction. Tiny hummingbirds flew from flower to flower. A female broad-tailed hummingbird had made her nest on a branch below the road. She sat very still in her nest as we walked on the road within twenty-five feet of her. We looked at her, talked quietly, and kept walking, thrilled that she had built where we could stop on our walks and see her progress as she hatched and raised her tiny offspring.

Raven flew in wind down the mountain, turned and faced the wind, opened its wings wide. Wind carried the large, black bird toward the sun. High in the clean sky, Raven folded wings and dropped like a falling star. Just above dark green trees, it spread its wings, curved to a stop, hung stationary in the wind, then let the wind carry it beyond the trees, where we could no longer see it.

I said, "I'd like to ride the wind like that." We turned from the dirt road onto the trail through grasses bleached yellow, with new green grass growing up through yellow in sunshine. We walked beside Lone Pine Creek, still mostly frozen over. Ice melted, and water ran noisily in open areas. Wind spoke wildly to trees, grass, to us, to huge granite rock formations that rose toward mountain blue sky.

Raven flew toward us across the granite ridge that stands beyond the meadow, flew past us just above the trees on our side of the meadow, rolled onto its back while flying, rolled upright, then rolled again.

Amanda said, "Raven shows off for us."

"Raven thinks it's responsible for my enlightenment. Raven lives with neither storehouse nor barn. It's an intelligent bird and lives in joy. Raven tells me my sustenance might come to me through a system of business and profits, at financial cost to me, but the life force that causes everything to live and grow does so freely, for joy, for love. Raven keeps telling me I can't concentrate on physical survival and believe treasures are material, or I miss the joy of this moment and the joy of the spiritual force that drives life."

"Between your job and your writing, you do miss out on

some of the beauty around us.”

“My own golden haired daughter joins black, shiny-feathered Raven to try to break through my human limitations and enlighten me.”

We wandered in wind still blowing hard. I stopped in sunshine and said, “Well, I do have ranch work to finish. I hope to finish an essay and maybe plant a few seeds in the garden.” I turned toward home.

Amanda said, “I’m going to walk farther up the ranch.” She walked away but stopped and turned to wave goodby. She called into spring wind, “Don’t forget to play in the wind and sunshine. Don’t forget to fly upside-down sometimes.”

I said, “Wait.” I caught up with Amanda. “I believe you and Raven. We need to store up joy and appreciation for the earth and wind and life as much as we need to put up firewood and food for winter. I’ve worked, and I will work. There is time now for this.”

Wind blew across the meadow. Amanda and I walked up the ranch. We danced in spring wind. We watched the day grow like green grass around us. We soaked up sunshine. We watched birds of the air fly above us and around us. Animals of the ground ran away from us, stopped to look at us, and ran again. A yellow-bellied marmot stood up straight on a huge granite boulder at the foot of the granite ridge and whistled to alert the rest of its tribe that humans were near and possibly dangerous. Far up the ranch, we climbed granite rock of a huge ridge of granite rock, where small trees, grass, flowers grew from every small pocket where granite had eroded to soil.

We stood high above the world, and looked miles over wild Rocky Mountains in all directions. From where we stood, we could see no sign of other humans. Amanda said, “It could be a thousand years ago, a thousand years in the future. We could be here alone, no other humans in the universe.”

Wind sang and played through forest on our mountain. I loved the windy afternoon. I felt free as a bird, free as a hummingbird, free as a raven in clean sunshine on a beautiful mountain. Raven watched us from the top of a tall fir tree, below our high place of granite stone, then flew away from us up the mountain and called loudly, a joyous call that caught in the wind and echoed across the mountain. We answered, a call of joy without words that followed Raven up the mountain in spring sunshine.