



Children's Story – Gluscabi and the Wind Eagle, an Abenaki Story adapted by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac

Reading

Eagle Poem

BY JOY HARJO

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear;
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.

Sermon

When the Swedish band ABBA hit the airwaves in the mid-1970s, it was no accident. Formed of two married couples, they had been trying to break into the big time for years. When they decided to place the two women front and center, with the men supporting them, the band began to make headway. First they smashed the charts in Europe, then Australia, and finally the most coveted markets, Britain and the United States. By 1978 the band was playing to crowds of 10 000 or more.

#

My mother fell in love with ABBA. She entered motherhood in 1970 at the age of 23, and by 1976, when ABBA burst onto the North American charts; she had four kids, two in diapers. ABBA helped her escape the often-mundane reality of being a mother and housewife. I have images of her standing at the stove making dinner singing, "You are the dancing queen, Young and sweet, only seventeen." She'd haul laundry up and down the basement stairs, singing, "If you dream of the girl for you, then call us and get two for the price of one." In the mid-1980s, when ABBA was considered totally passé, she refused to let it go. She would pack the four of us into the station wagon on Friday nights to go grocery shopping, roll down the windows and crank the stereo. "Gimme, Gimme, Gimme a Man after midnight, won't somebody help me chase the shadows away."

Our mother taught us that music was a way to reground yourself when the world seemed to be taking more out of you than you thought you had. Because of her love for ABBA, I fell in love with the last song we sang, Eagle. That was my song. Many days I would come home from school, and lie down between the two living room speakers and listen to Eagle over and over again. "Flyin' high, high, I'm a bird in the sky, I'm an eagle that rides on the breeze..." It was my escape from days that were much harder than days should have been for a 7 or 8 or 9 year old, and that's because I was bullied all through school. I'm not sure what it was about me that made me a target. Was it my clothing or that I didn't speak English when I started school? Maybe those girls sensed in me a sexual orientation I didn't even know existed yet. But it really doesn't matter why; what matters is that it happened, and ABBA became one of my tools to build myself back up when I got home from school.

Any of you who have been bullied will know implicitly why I hated the school bus, lunch hour, recess, the locker room, and the restroom; any time period that wasn't structured, and any place that wasn't supervised, wasn't safe. I tried all kinds of survival techniques. I tried being super nice to the mean girls. That just made me more vulnerable. I tried to avoid them. That made me look scared. I sat by the bus driver and stayed close to the teachers. That made me a sissy. I kept trying to get the courage to fight back, to have the perfect taunt in response to theirs, or to somehow find the perfect way to get them to leave me alone, and I just couldn't figure it out, and of course looking unsure just made me more of a target. One day in the bathroom, one of the girls started bullying my friend, who actually got it way worse than me, and I snapped and I nailed her. And because I knew she would never tell, because who wanted to be a snitch, I nailed her again. I got a little respectful distance, for about a week. But then I learned that you can't just beat someone up once and expect it to be done. When you open that door to violence, when you bully back, you get the reputation of being a scrapper. You've opened Pandora's box, and the only way to survive is through more violence. In order to keep their respect, I had to be ready to fight any time anywhere, whatever it cost. And I just couldn't do that.

So I would come home from school and listen to Eagle, "High, high, What a feeling to fly. Over mountains and forests and trees, and to go anywhere that I please..." and imagine myself flying so high that nothing could get me.

As many of you may know, there have been a rash of highly publicized teen suicides in the last few weeks. All of them are connected to bullying. In all cases, the teens either

#

identified as gay or were identified by their bullies as gay. In all cases, authority figures, who could have stopped the bullying, stood by and did nothing. And in all cases, there were those on the sidelines who were concerned by the bullying but either didn't think there was anything to do or were afraid to do anything.

For people who didn't grow up gay, these stories of bullying feel new, and the horror many have expressed reflects that newness. Gay people are more likely to feel horror not at its newness, but at its sameness. What's new is that it is getting noticed. What's new is that we have the internet and Facebook and YouTube and a national media that is actually willing to cover stories that would have been ignored five or ten years ago. What's new is that people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered aren't being shamed into silence anymore. Instead, many are stepping up and saying, "This happened to me too, and this is what I experienced," and they're posting it all over the internet. The silence is gone. For people like me who were bullied, this has been life changing. We have learned that we were not alone in our experience, that we weren't the only ones this was happening to.

In our children's story this morning, we have a story of an eagle and a boy who have much to learn from each other. This story is about relationships and about power and how it is to be used. The boy, Gluscabi, has a need to hunt, but the wind is blowing so strong that he can't get what he needs. When he discovers the source of the wind he uses trickery to strip the eagle of his power. The wind stops and the boy returns home thinking he has what he wants. But it doesn't turn out that way at all. He has instead created a huge imbalance. Nothing is right. The rains stop and everything begins to die. He has to go back and set the eagle free. Now this next part is what I find most significant. When he unties the eagle, he doesn't just say, sorry, go bring back the wind. Gluscabi asks the eagle to be more aware of his power. The eagle so fell in love with his own power that he created winds much too strong, so strong that they could completely undo life. He was in his own private world, unaware of the impact of his choices on the rest of the world. The eagle was able to hear the boy and scale back the speed of his wings. In the end, the eagle is free and Gluscabi can hunt.

It would be easy to simply demonize those who bully and to blame them for the tremendous suffering they cause. But let me tell you about those who bullied me. One was doing drugs by the time she was 13. Another got pregnant in high school and dropped out. Another was being sexually abused by her father. Most of these girls had been deeply shamed, so their cruelty was not innate to who they were. I don't want to say there are no evil people, but most people who do violence have been violated themselves. To use the imagery from our children's story, the wind in their lives blew so fiercely that they lost first their moccasins, then their shirts, their hair and finally their eyebrows. These young girls had been stripped of so much; they were forcing their pain on everyone around them. When I fought back, I was being like Gluscabi, thinking that if I could just control the ones who tormented me that all would be fine, but it wasn't. It just created more violence, which was all they knew. Every one of us needed to be protected. We needed the eagle to see that his wings beat too strongly. And, we needed Gluscabi to see that he couldn't protect us by simply restraining the wings of a bird.

#

What we see in all these instances of bullying are the dynamics of a human condition that we have been struggling with since we evolved into our species, and that is the cycle of violence that is fuelled by fear and shame. How do you stop that cycle? Every religious tradition has tried to provide an answer: The Ten Commandments of the Jewish Tradition, the Golden Rule of Christianity to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, Paganism's rule, that you may do as you will so long as it harm no one, Buddhism's central practice of non-attachment, and Unitarian Universalism's interdependent web of life.

In this morning's prayer, which I developed using the writing of Nietzsche, we prayed the following words: "There has been so much virtue that has flown away. Let us lead back to the earth the virtue that flew away, back to the body, back to life, back to ourselves, that it may give the earth and all living things on it a place of recovery from all that separates us from each other, bringing salvation and new hope to all."

How do we bring back to the earth the virtue that we hunger for? Every one of us yearns to be virtuous. We want to be the good guys. We want to be part of the solution, not the problem. One of the things I've become convinced of is that we cannot be part of the solution if we become self-righteous in the face of the kind of bullying that led to this rash of suicides, because then we become bullies ourselves. We cannot afford to be self-righteous even if those who bully are never ever able to come to a place of acknowledging their violence, much less asking forgiveness for it. There is a difference between holding someone accountable for their actions, and shaming or dehumanizing them for what they have done.

This does not mean that I should have been content to suffer in silence when I was a young girl, or that those who are bullied should lie down and take it. Right now our state legislature is considering Missouri Safe Schools Legislation that would strengthen anti-bullying measures for our schools. We need to do this because the deaths and the trauma have to stop. We also need to do this to help those children who are trapped in cycles of violence that they cannot understand even as they become its perpetrators.

About a year ago I met one of my enemies on Facebook! She friended me. My first response was one of tremendous caution. One of her tricks had been to pretend to want to be friends with me, and when I let her close, to laugh at me and shame me for my foolish trust. Would I be setting myself up if I let her be my Facebook friend? I thought about it for a while, and then I said yes. And what I found out is that she had stopped doing drugs, she had met a wonderful man, and had two lovely daughters, one of whom had just started college. She loved her daughters and was so proud of them. And although she never apologized to me, just her telling me the simple realities of her adult life healed something.

Did you know that ABBA became an icon in the gay community? With their outrageous glitzy costumes and catchy tunes, and two strong beautiful women, how many drag queens do you think have painstakingly transformed themselves into Frida Lyngstad or Agnetha Faeltskog and strutted their stuff on a Saturday night in some nameless bar on the wrong side of town? With ABBA's songs of hope and despair, love gained and love lost, and the paradoxes of life that could beat you down or take you to the top of the world, a community that faced oppression, repression, used ABBA's music to build themselves back up in a world that made it really hard to simply be.

#

If you change your mind, I'm the first in line
Honey I'm still free
Take a chance on me
If you need me, let me know, gonna be around
If you've got no place to go, if you're feeling down
If you're all alone when the pretty birds have flown
Honey I'm still free
Take a chance on me
Gonna do my very best, baby can't you see
Gotta put me to the test, take a chance on me

May we be with each other, may we be there for each other, and may the spirit be with you and yours. Amen.