The Old Man and the Bird

Tim Miank

Grand Valley State University
I got the news you were again
my card
a dollar
used for treats.

same night
with sucked hollow
eleven years
you lay in
father's arms,
rattle of
bones
ring out his cries
make you.

Jan Spielmacher

"The idea of this particular speech and, ultimately,
this particular course, is to introduce all of you to the
notion of logic behind logic." The old man who spoke these
words—a tall, gaunt man with a stiff gray beard—had,
at the moment, no apparent listeners. Alone on a park bench
near State University, he began to repeat the same words over
again. "The idea of this particular speech—"

"So what?" The shrill clarity of the words broke the
old man's concentration. Looking around to see who was
addressing him, he was surprised to find that no one was
there. Annoyed, he coughed to himself and began over again.

"The idea of this par—"

"I said so what." This time the intruding voice came
through even clearer. The old man got up from the bench
and looked around.

"Who said that?" he asked, squinting his already small
eyes in the sunlight.

"I did." The old man, this time catching the direction
from where the voice came, turned around and saw a sky-blue
pigeon, alone on a limb, staring him in the face.

"You?" he asked, pointing at the bird with his right
hand and scratching his dark gray scalp with the other.

"That's right, me." At that, the pigeon gave its wings
a slight flutter and floated down to the bench. "How do you
do?" he offered, extending his right claw to shake. "My
name is Ted."

The old man, unable to believe what was happening, put
out his hand and prepared to perform his half of the age-old
greeting ritual. "My name is—"

Again the bird interrupted. "Excuse me, but before you
continue, permit me to tell you what I already know about you.
OK?"

The old man, unable to talk, nodded in agreement.

"Alright then," the bird continued, "your name is Phillip
Kern, or should I perhaps say Dr. Phillip Kern, Professor of
Philosophy at State University. You are sixty-three years
old, a widower, and you live alone in a four-room apartment just two blocks from campus. You have been studying and teaching philosophy for over forty years, and during that time you have been a highly consistent practitioner of the subject, you have always stuck by your claim that philosophy, as well as many other facets of education, is most effectively handled when approached from a simple, logical perspective.

"How did you know all of that?" The old man still could not believe that he was talking to a bird; as he spoke he looked around, thinking he might be the butt of some kind of joke, perhaps at the hands of some crazy ventriloquist-voice thrower or something. At the moment, that seemed like the only logical explanation. "It's incredible," he muttered, then repeated, "How did you know all of that?"

"Well," the bird answered, after he had collected his thoughts, "I've been watching you for about eight years now. You probably won't believe this, but in all that time I've only missed three of your lectures. Of course, I can't say I always agree with your theories, but I must admit that I find you a most interesting gentleman."

"You mean," the professor's voice cracked with nervous surprise, "you mean to tell me that you've been in my classrooms?"

"That's right, my friend. Of course, I don't indulge in notetaking due to my lack of claw coordination, but I have an infallible memory." Suddenly the pigeon's attention jumped from the old man to the sky. "See those specks up there?" he asked, fluttering his wings. "Those specks are my two friends. I think they're waiting for me so I'd better get going."

"Wait! Wait a minute!" The old man's piercing cry stopped the bird in mid-takeoff. "If what you say is true, if you really have been to all those lectures, then prove it. Prove that this whole conversation has been real. Please come to my opening lecture tomorrow."

"I'd like to, but what if I can't make it?"

"If you don't come tomorrow, then I will have no choice but to resign from my position."
you live alone in a four-room apartment on campus. You have been studying and teaching over forty years, and during that time you have been a highly consistent practitioner of your claim that many other facets of education are made more interesting when approached from a simple, direct method. "How did you know all of that?" The old man still asked as he was talking to a bird; as he spoke, the pigeon watched for a moment that he might be the butt of some kind of joke, but then he relaxed. "It's incredible," answered the old man as he collected his thoughts. "How did you know all of that?" "I've been watching you for about eight years," the bird replied. "Of course, I can't latch on to your theories, but I must admit you're an interesting gentleman." "Professor's voice cracked with nervousness. "Tell me that you've been in my class for about eight years," he demanded, "but in all that time I haven't believe this, but in all that time I've been listening to your lectures. Of course, I can't latch on to your theories, but I must admit you're an interesting gentleman." "Because if you don't come," the old man said in a solemn tone, "then I'll know that this conversation has been just a figment of my imagination, a hallucination, and, as it must follow, I'll know that I am going crazy." "The bird smiled. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself," he said. "I'll be seeing you." With a pull of the wings, the bird was gone, just another speck on the sky.

Once again, the old man was alone. He stood there in the lonely park, unbelieving, yet uncertain of what had or had not happened. As he began walking home, he tried to think of logical explanations for what he was feeling. Still not ruling out the possibility of a practical joke, he wondered if some clever kid wasn't laughing at him this very minute. He also considered his present condition as a possible explanation; he thought a while on his age, his many years in the profession, and on the many lectures, debates, and social pressures that are included in a life such as his. He was also fully aware of the problems he had faced last term, when several students complained to the dean about his unfairness and many others simply dropped his courses.

He knew, too, that he was at the present time under a great deal of pressure; the University Board of Control had warned him that he had better have more success with students in the upcoming term. "I guess I have been pushing myself a little bit too hard," the old man thought as he left the park. "That's got to be the reason."

As night fell, the old man, now at his apartment, retired early into his small, well-kept bedroom. There, he quietly pulled back the sheets on his bed, turned out the small green lamp on the table, and, lying down, closed his weary eyes in hopes of sudden slumber.

His healthy sleep was interrupted after eight hours and fifteen minutes by the brash calling of an alarm clock. As the old man slammed it quiet and began adjusting his eyes to the morning light, he noticed a rather large bird sitting on a branch just outside his window.
"Oh my God, it's that bird!" he said rather loudly, as if some far-off person was listening. Defying his age, he quickly jumped out of bed and threw open the window to get a better look. The bird, startled by the sudden noise, flew off into the sky. "What am I doing?" the old man muttered to himself, "I've got to take a rest. I've got to be crazy, jumping out of bed to talk with a bird. Now look at me, I'm standing here talking to myself!" He quickly silenced his loud thoughts and went in to fix breakfast.

Things were hectic on this opening morning at State University. When the old man—Dr. Kern—arrived, it was 8:45, just fifteen minutes before his first class was to meet. Since he had arrived so late—it had taken him a half-hour to find a pair of cuff links—he decided it best to go straight to the lecture hall, finish the preparation of his lecture remarks, and, in an act totally disdaining earthly logic, he decided to pray for the best.

All the while he kept trying, unsuccessfully, to keep the bird out of his mind. As the students began filing into the hall, and as the professor stood at the podium, rehearsing, ("The idea of this particular speech..."), memories of yesterday's conversation kept entering his mind.

As the old man stood thinking, his eyes began to stare at the ceiling. As they looked, Dr. Kern realized that he, for no apparent reason, was starting to believe what had happened the day before. He began to realize that he was actually scanning the ceiling in hopes of finding a scholarly bird!

When nine o'clock—the magic hour—arrived, the professor faced his audience. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "my name is—"

The professor was interrupted by a tapping noise. Turning in the direction of the noise, he saw at one of his windows a sky-blue pigeon staring him in the face.

At once shaken, he quickly regained his composure.

"Excuse me, class," he announced as a wide smile travelled across his face, "but I think I'd better open the window. It seems that we have a visitor."
that bird!" he said rather loudly, as he was listening. Defying his age, he got out of bed and threw open the window to get some fresh air, startled by the sudden noise, "What am I doing?" the old man was thinking. "I've got to take a rest. I've got to get out of bed to talk with a bird. Now I'm here talking to myself!"

As the old man--Dr. Kern--arrived, it was minutes before his first class was to begin. Arriving so late--it had taken him a pair of cuff links--he decided it best to get to the lecture hall, finish the preparation, and, in an act totally disdaining the good thinking, his eyes began to stare wide open. As the students began filing in, the professor stood at the podium, keeping his eyes fixed on this opening morning at State. "My name is Dr. Kern and I would like to offer all of you a question." The old man paused, looked up at the bird, then returned his eyes to the class and asked, "How many of you feel that logic is for the birds?"

Tim Miank

As the professor walked to the window, his class buzzed with wonder. But he ignored all noise; opening the window, he smiled at the bird and said, quite simply, "It's good to see you, Ted." The bird, in unusual form, winked back, fluttered its wings, and flew upward, finally nestling itself on a crossbar at the top of the room.

"Now then," the old man said as he walked back to the podium, "my name is Dr. Kern and I would like to offer all of you a question." The old man paused, looked up at the bird, then returned his eyes to the class and asked, "How many of you feel that logic is for the birds?"