

There once was an old man who lived alone in a small cottage at the edge of the woods, near a little village. The man was mostly forgotten by the people of the village. His friends had all died, or moved away and he lived a very lonely life in his modest little home. His thoughts were his only companions and the only enjoyment he had were long walks through the woods. He often wished for a friend with whom to pass the time of day.

One day while walking through the woods he found a small bird that had fallen from its nest and had been abandoned by his mother. The little creature had a broken wing and was practically dead from starvation and exposure to the elements. The old man gently scooped up the frail little bird and carried it back to his humble cottage.

For days and days the old man gave all of his attention to the little bird. He kept the bird warm and at first gave it just water. After a day or so the man began to hunt for seeds and grubs and other things that he thought his foundling could eat. Often he sat and held the bird, stroking its feathers and talking to it gently, as if the bird were a person. The old man even rigged up a splint to keep the broken wing still and allow it to heal.

As days became weeks it became obvious that, thanks to the old man's care, the unfortunate creature would survive. It got stronger and began to grow. It began to chirp happily and seemed to actually try to communicate with the old man. The man began to believe he could understand what some of the chirping sounds meant. His days were not nearly so long and he eagerly looked forward to each new morning. The old man was happier than he had been in years.

As the passing weeks turned into a month, and then two, the bird's wing had healed. The splint had been removed and the bird began to fly around the little cabin. Short hops at first, staying close to the floor. The old man was thrilled to see the little bird fly and offered encouragement. Soon the bird was flying all over the cabin and spent more and more time exploring the rafters and ceiling. Now that the bird could fly the old man had to be very careful to keep the door to his cabin closed tightly.

Then one day the old man noticed that his small friend was no longer spending its time soaring among the rafters of the little cabin. Instead the bird spent most of every day sitting on the window ledge, staring at the green woods and the blue skies beyond. The happy chirping had been replaced by plaintive little peeps. Sadly the old man realized that the bird was no longer content to test its wings within the confines of the cabin but longed to explore the vast world which lay outside the cabin window.

But the old man was afraid to send the little bird out into the world. There were so many things that could happen. Perhaps he wouldn't be able to find food. Perhaps he would lose his way. Perhaps he would be eaten by a snake or carried away by a hawk. And besides--the old man had come to rely on his little friend for companionship. The old man knew that if he opened the cabin door the bird would fly away, never to return and he, the old man, would be sad and lonely again.

But after a few days the old man could no longer bear to watch the bird sit forlornly on the window sill. He knew that the time had come to allow the bird to be a

bird--after all, that's why he had nursed him back to health in the first place. Early one morning he took his friend, his only friend, in his hands and walked out into the bright sunshine. He held the bird tightly one last time, murmured a little prayer for the creature's safety, then tossed him upward toward the sky.

And the once frail little bird spread his wings and soared.

Skyward he went--above the trees. The old man looked up with both sadness and pride as the little bird flew up and up--straight toward the sun--then leveled off, darting this way and that--soaring over the trees--singing happily at the sheer joy of flight. The old man watched as the little bird flew away, almost out of sight.

But then a curious thing happened. The bird turned in midflight and flew straight back toward the old man, gently landing on his shoulder. The man looked down at the bird. The imploring expression in the creature's eyes was like that of a human. The bird seemed to be asking for permission to fly away--for permission to be what God had created it to be.

"But no," the old man thought. "My friend is not asking for my permission, but rather my blessing. And surely my blessing I must give."

The old man smiled down at the bird perched on his shoulder. Then he placed the bird in the palm of one hand and lifted it gently toward the heavens.

"Fly away my friend," he said to the bird. "Fly away and be what you were created to be."

And the bird lifted its wings and flew into the wind and away--over the trees to unknown lands beyond.

The old man missed his feathered friend. But his days were happier and his nights more content because he knew that at one time in his life he had helped one of God's creatures be what it had been created to be.

FAVORITE STORY TOLD BY COACH BRADLEY
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1/29/97

To Jan -
You'll never know
what you continue to
mean to me.
I love you -
Darrell Huckaby