

DEBORAH ROSS

Bad Company

On top of everything else, I was worried about the Rainbow Pigeons.

What on earth are Rainbow Pigeons, you may ask?

That's a hard question, because if you live here in West Oahu, you probably take them for granted, and if you don't, they won't make any sense to you, but I'll try to explain. Since after almost thirty years in Hawai'i I'm still sort of a stranger here, they were strange to me too at first.

A few years ago, driving along Moanalua Road on my way to the Eastbound freeway entrance, I noticed a little wooden sign on a fence by someone's yard containing the words "Rainbow Pigeons," each letter a different color, with a phone number underneath, and nothing else. I vaguely wondered what they were, whether they had anything to do with the University of Hawai'i sports teams (the Rainbown Warriors), or if someone actually was breeding and selling some special variety of pigeon out of his garage, but as I was usually alone while driving, or with one of the kids, who I tend to assume don't know anything, it never occurred to me to ask out loud. By the time I got anywhere where anyone might know, I had forgotten all about it, until the next time I saw the sign, and I got in the habit of wondering about this every day for, maybe, a minute and a half.

Then late one afternoon, I saw them: a whole flock of birds, pink, blue, yellow, green, circling in the sky near Momilani Suburb, flying in perfect formation. Aha, I thought, those must be the Rainbow Pigeons! And every once in a while after that, if I happened to be picking up Anton at middle school or dropping Violet off at her friend's house in Pearl Highlands at just the right time, I'd see them again and get excited. Not that I really like birds all that much, especially pigeons, but these were special. Wordsworth's heart may have leapt up when he saw a rainbow in the sky, but you get used to those out here. What made my heart leap up was the Rainbow Pigeons. Somehow when I saw them, I felt lucky—at least for a few seconds.

Even then, though, after that initial uplift, I'd start worrying. How did they get to have those different colors? I've seen a lot of pigeons in my time, in a pretty broad range of sizes, but as for their color, even in the tropics, they seem mostly to be in greyscale. Had they been cross-bred with parakeets or cockatiels? Might they not then be experiencing that sense of cultural dislocation that so often haunts children of mixed-race marriages? Or had they been dyed? Might not the process be unhealthy, not only physically, but psychically, producing feelings of alienation from the more "normally" hued pigeon mainstream?

And then, how did they learn the flight pattern? One sees that sort of thing in geese, but most of the pigeons I've observed have seemed to me to be either scavenging alone or crowding around in a most undisciplined manner. So someone must have trained them. Yet all the literature on operant conditioning I've ever read suggests they're pretty slow learners, much subject to superstition and fixed ideas, pecking stubbornly at a key that has produced food only once in a thousand trials, even to the point of starvation. So how is the Rainbow choreography achieved? Electric shock? Time out? And then, once they get it, are they perhaps bothered by the attendant loss of dignity, as one imagines

is the case with, say, performing seals and dolphins? Should one, perhaps, do something about this, write to the Humane Society, or PETA?

Though it had never occurred to me to voice any of these concerns as I drove the kids around, it was Violet who turned out to have answers to at least some of my questions. One day when we actually saw the Rainbow Pigeons flying around, she mentioned that they had visited her school, and their master had explained everything I had wanted to know before showing off what they could do. It seems the birds start out as different shades of grey, some a little greener, or a little bluer, and he dyes them to make the colors stand out more. He does this by bathing them very gently with non-toxic materials, and the birds don't seem to mind (as far as he could tell, but of course, he might choose not to notice their embarrassment).

As for their performance, again the trainer works with the birds' natural tendencies, with lots of individual attention, using the least aggressive methods possible. From early childhood, each pigeon is rewarded for displaying its natural homing behavior and is allowed to range gradually a little farther each day until it learns to come back at dinnertime from just about anywhere. If a bird ever fails to return, he does not go after it and lock it in its room and take away its allowance. He simply respects its desire for freedom and replaces it with another fledgling. Those pigeons who choose to stay are apparently happy with their place in the daily flight pattern. After all, as a species they seem rather unimaginative and are not often seized with a sudden desire to experience life from a new perspective.

The reason for the rather cryptic sign on Moanalua Road was to enable those who already knew all about the Rainbow Pigeons by word of mouth to hire them for celebrations like graduations and weddings and big anniversaries. The pigeons don't exactly perform: the master just lets them go, and they fly around and then, from wherever they are, they fly home. They have only one destination, and they will only do it once in a day, so probably their union is pretty well satisfied.

Nothing to worry about, in other words. So why, during Christmas break, when I had so many things to worry about, was I also worried about the Rainbow Pigeons?

First of all, I should explain what else I was worried about. Number one: it was Christmas, and my children were missing. This is a slight exaggeration. My children were somewhere in LA. Okay, they weren't alone, they were with their father, but that in itself tends to worry me even when they're only across town. They were all flying standby to Atlanta to be with my ex-in-laws for the holidays, there was a blizzard somewhere in the Midwest, all the flights were overflowing, and they would have to wait it out at LAX for at least two days. They would get a distressed travelers' discount at a nearby hotel. They had no spare clothes, no cell phone charger, no place to stay yet when last heard from, so no number where they could be reached. And for two days they didn't call, they didn't turn up in Atlanta, and I was frantic.

I know why they didn't call. The last time they did, I suggested they get on a flight back here and skip the whole thing. I suggested it wasn't worth all this fear and frustration. But those flights were also full, and, as Violet told me, they didn't want to talk about coming back because they were supposed to speak and think only positive thoughts about the next plane. That way they would get a seat.

I'm not sure whose idea that was or how it was supposed to work. As they were flying on family passes, thanks to their flight attendant auntie, I knew there was a strict airline dress code—no denim, no sneakers, no t-shirts—so maybe there was an attitude requirement as well. Or as their father had been spending more and more time at the Krishna Temple (though at the moment eschewing his robes in favor of the requisite collared shirt), the determination to be positive may have been his own twisted, Americanized version of Karma, according to which if you release good spiritual energy into the

universe you will receive an immediate, material reward. Whether the policy originated with Dad or with Delta, one thing was clear: no one was to call Mom. Mom was worried. Mom was negative. They just couldn't take the chance.

When I finally reached my sister-in-law, who had heard from her brother and my kids, I saw that I wasn't going to get much sympathy. Although she would probably make them call me, she was also strongly on the side of enforced optimism. Of course she would not be so negative as to criticize me for worrying, but she did say, in a tone intended to forestall as much of my negativity as possible, that it's all a matter of attitude. One holiday their whole family had been in Hong Kong—no, it was Singapore, I heard my mother-in-law correcting her in the background; apparently this was some kind of long-distance group intervention—and couldn't get a flight to Bangkok, and they had to wrap up hotel soaps and shampoos in newspaper as Christmas presents. I guess the point was supposed to be that they were still just as happy.

Well, maybe they were. But why? If it were a sitcom—like the *Full House* episode where Michelle and Uncle Jesse are locked in a garage and miss her special birthday party—it would be clear that material things are less important than being together; that creative, hand-made gifts given with love are the best of all; that if adults set children an example of seeing life as an adventure, they will grow up to be less fearful and more flexible. These are all wonderful, positive messages. But I wanted to ask my nephew, who had probably been four or five at the time: was soap really as good a Christmas present as whatever he had asked Santa for? Or did he know then that his real presents would definitely be there in a day or two? Was he prevented from being frightened in a foreign country without any of his stuff around because the adults were being so determinedly chipper? Or was he just jollied into keeping quiet about it? (As for my own kids, would they be allowed to feel even a little sad about the big Christmas party they were going to miss, and for which my daughter had specially brought her fringed, spaghetti-strapped eleven-year-old version of a cocktail dress?) And then there is the biggest question of all, since life is not a sitcom: were they all truly safe? Is there ever really nothing to worry about?

Maybe I should have been happy with a prospect of three full weeks without my kids (longer, of course, if they were never found). I'm always saying I need a break. And maybe this would have been good if I could have spent that time with my boyfriend (can a boyfriend be 64?). Unfortunately, Dan also had left. His sister, very unexpectedly, had had a heart attack and died, the whole family was in shock, and naturally, he needed to be with them. Why didn't I go along? He would say, and maybe believes, the dates wouldn't have worked with my children's departure. I would say I could have gone, but he didn't really want me there. Both of us are partly right.

This brings me to worry number two. I had three weeks to think about what this difference of opinion meant, and this is what I came up with: whenever anything really bad happens, Dan's impulse is usually to try to deal with it on his own. (In this way he resembles his sister, who may well have known about her heart condition and said nothing, not wanting to worry anyone.) Part of him wants to have his pain shared and acknowledged. But mainly the effort of making the sympathizer feel helpful cancels out most of the benefit for him. He may want someone to cry with for five minutes, but after that, he wants to be left alone, to go outside by himself and look at something, to get away from pain, from negativity. And as life gets tougher rather than easier as we age, I'm thinking, here also is someone who is often not going to want to talk to me.

So there I am, all alone, realizing that the three-bedroom townhouse I may just finish paying for in time for retirement will be a terrible place to retire in. After all these years of repressing homesickness for the house I grew up in, struggling to make a home for my children in a space that seems too small

for us, but that would no doubt seem luxurious to one of the Waianae beach families displaced by people like me, I'm still basically Ruth amid the alien corn. Some day my children really won't come back. My friends live too far away to get out west of the airport very often, and as for my neighbors, once we don't have our children to talk about any more, they're bound to find out my real opinions on topics like Jesus and Iraq. And my 'boyfriend'? He has said often enough that I'm so different from him that he can't imagine ever living with me, so most of the time he'll probably be in some outdoorsy place far away, like Mount Shasta, or, eventually, Heaven.

I see now that things have been moving in this direction for a long time. I remember the parenting classes held at the private school where Anton went to kindergarten. Each of us was supposed to write on an index card a vision statement of how we would like our child to be. Then we were to watch the child for signs of the desired behavior. The point, it turned out, was that somehow, miraculously, just by writing down our ideals and looking for them, we would start to notice that our child already is all that we desire. Guess who was the only one whose child was still just as problematic as he always was? From that point on, I was politely excluded from class dialogues, as my son was gradually edged out of the school.

The same kind of thing is still happening in yoga class, where I'm basically alone in a crowd, because I seem to be the only one who doesn't chant. I don't know what's the matter with me. Ask me to sing along at a rock concert, or even ask me not to, and there's no stopping me. I'll sing on the floor, among strangers, wherever. Nor do I balk at anything else Sherri, our instructor, asks us to do, however impossible or contorted it may sound. Maybe it's the too-smooth, echoey instrumentation of her meditation CD. Maybe it's the group's exceptional indifference to any kind of tonality. Maybe it's the probable delusiveness of the offer of desperately needed spiritual nourishment made in an unfamiliar and therefore, to me, nonsense language. For whatever reason, although as soon as I get in the car I'll find myself humming that awful, repetitious, vaguely Celtic melody all the way home, when called upon to add my voice to the cacophonous throng in class I sit there mute, no doubt exuding a noxious cloud of bad vibes, for which Sherri, professionally non-judgmental, conscientiously honoring both the good and the bad, does not charge me extra.

It's obvious where all this will lead. It's the too familiar tautology of depression: I'm depressed because I'm alone; and then, I'm alone because I'm depressed. I think about Sylvia Plath. Or about a character in Darrell Lum's story, "No Pass Back": Throw-up Shirley. This is the girl who is so unpopular for always throwing up that she has trouble finding anyone to pass the punch on to in the game of "pass on, no pass back," and so people avoid her even more to avoid a punch, and so she cries, and so she becomes a triple pariah. I wonder whatever happened to her.

As I worked all this out in my mind, I turned for consolation to old familiar novels by Elizabeth Taylor and Barbara Pym—*Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont*, *Quartet in Autumn*—about aging and loneliness. Dan would say they were bad company under the circumstances, but they certainly knew what it was all about. The older the characters get, the more desperately they need a connection, any connection, even with people they don't much like or understand; and, paradoxically, the needier they get, the more repulsed they are by neediness in others, the more tightly they cling to the belief that they are not as pathetic as so-and-so—the more stubbornly they refuse to admit they're in the same boat. ("Rather comic, the picture of all these retired people in some kind of boat," muses Pym's social worker Janice Brabner—not realizing she will be in it herself soon enough [Pym 121].)

Meanwhile, I had new reasons to worry about the Rainbow Pigeons. I hadn't seen them in a long time, and their sign seemed to be gone. I drove back and forth on Moanalua Road, trying to remember exactly where it had been, peering off to the side till I almost hit cars in front and in the next

lane, and I saw a lot of construction, but no sign. I read an article about homing pigeons that said that once they have lived in one place, they can't learn to fly back to a new one—unlike humans, who aren't considered mature until they've made homes of their own, and who usually move several times in their lives, and somehow adjust, though some better than others. The article profiled a little girl whose father's job was forcing them to move to another state. Since the people buying their old house didn't want her pigeons, and she couldn't take them to the new house, she had to give them away, and they would spend the rest of their lives in cages in their new owner's yard, for their own protection—otherwise they would keep flying, trying in vain to find their old homes, until they eventually dropped into the ocean. I wondered if the Rainbow Pigeons were now behind bars somewhere, and how that would feel after a lifetime of flying every day. I wondered if in their sleep they still saw the roof tiles of their old Pearl Highlands neighborhood, as I see the cracks in the sidewalks of my childhood, only to wake up in tears because this is not 1962, but now, and not Utica, New York, but Paradise.

Of course, this time, the children did come back. Weeks went by, I didn't see the pigeons, and I thought about them whenever we drove that way, but I never said anything. No point spreading anxiety. But once again, it turned out that Violet had the answer. One day, on our way to her friend's house, all of a sudden, there they were. "The Rainbow Pigeons!" I yelled. "I was so worried about them. I haven't seen them in a long time, and the sign is gone. I was sure something had happened."

"You should have said something!" Violet said. "I could have told you they were fine. I've seen them lots of times!"

Of course! Sometimes, you have to speak up. People don't always mind. And if you don't say anything, no one can help you.

Then again, she could have just been saying it to make me feel better. She has been known to make things up. And it's now been a few more weeks, and I haven't seen them again.

Works Cited

Lum, Darrell H. Y. "No Pass Back." In *Pass On, No Pass Back*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1990.

Pym, Barbara. *Quartet in Autumn*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.