

AS THE CROW FLIES

There once was a big black Crow who lived each day without much thought about it. In fact he took life pretty much for granted. Then one very bright sunny day he noticed this shadow following him. Crow decided to fly faster and see if he could lose it. But no matter how fast he flew the Shadow stayed right behind him. Crow was growing quite annoyed with this fellow whoever he was. He "Squawked" and "Cawed" for hours it seemed, stating clearly his anger. The Shadow just simply ignored him. Crow thought to himself, "This guy must be deaf!"

After wasting most of his day in this silly game, Crow felt completely exhausted. Tired and frustrated he looked for a good place to land and rest his aching wings. The Sun, now a huge orange ball, hung low in the evening sky and the Shadow seemed a little further away. As Crow descended a frightening thing began to happen. The Shadow grew into this giant, grotesque shape and raced up from behind until it reached Crow at the very moment his feet touched the ground. Anger turned to fear as a cold shiver ran down Crow's back. Scared and confused he screamed, "Who are you and why are you chasing me?" Just then the Sun disappeared below the horizon and in that very same instant the horrible Shadow was gone. Surprised, Crow looked this way and that, but no matter which way he looked, he could not find it. The Shadow had utterly vanished!

That night Crow had trouble sleeping. He kept returning to the memory of the Shadow grabbing him as he landed. It had caught him so easily. Crow admitted to himself, "I know I live life in a sort of daze, but surely I would have noticed this strange being if it had followed me before. Wouldn't I?" He drifted off in the early morning darkness only to bolt straight up from his fitful sleep a little later. The faint memory of a strange dream flittered across Crow's mind as he tried to get his bearings. He dimly remembered falling helplessly into a big black abyss. Trembling and groggy Crow tried to shake off the fear. He didn't have time to waste on a stupid dream. He had to figure out what to do if the Shadow returned.

Dawn arrived cold and gray. Great storm clouds filled the sky as wind whipped through the trees. Surely these were not good signs. But as Crow twisted his neck around trying

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to look in all directions at once, he found the Shadow to be nowhere in sight. With a grateful sigh of relief Crow thought it might be safe now to begin his normal daily routine. One last 360 degree scan of the horizon and he was off. Most of his day went as usual except every so often Crow caught something moving in the corner of his eye. He would spin his head around and his heart would pound only to find Rabbit or Coyote doing their own chores. Crow felt embarrassed but he comforted himself with the old saying, "Better safe than sorry".

The Shadow never returned that day or the next or even the next. The storm lasted the entire week. This was long enough for Crow to almost forget about the Shadow. He easily fell back into his old life of raiding other bird's nest for meals and scouting the local farmer's fields for snacks. He didn't even seem to mind the rain. When Crow did think of that horrible day, which was only by mistake, he wondered what happened to the shadow. He figured the wind must have blown it away. Allowing himself one last thought before he promised to never think of it again, Crow hoped the wind had blown it clear across the mountains never to return.

I'll tell you something that Crow probably would not admit because he was trying to erase these things from his mind. He did not like things that caused him to think. They would interrupt his usually uneventful day and cause him to worry or worse, to doubt. But during the days and nights following the dreaded chase, two new images surfaced from the dream that had startled him that fearful night. The first was the Sun and then, almost as if it appeared out of the fiery ball, was a beautiful white bird. These dream pictures flickered then disappeared as quickly as they had come and this suited Crow fine. He did not ask for them and besides, he was convinced he did not care about the dream or the Shadow. For you see, with every day that the Shadow failed to return, Crow's confidence grew until by the end of the week he had forgotten how scared he had truly been.

The day the storm ended found Crow mindlessly involved in his daily routine. The black clouds parted, the sun began to shine and the entire valley began to shake off the rain. Crow, having just finished a lunch consisting of two fresh eggs snatched from a neighbor's

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nest, was exiting quickly as the two upset parents returned. Crow thought to himself as he cleared the last branches of the old oak tree, "I've done nothing wrong. I'm only following the way of the world. You know the big eat the small. Besides I am a Crow and this is what Crows have always done", he added as an after thought.

The sun hit Crow's back and wings as he left the shade of the old oak and it felt good. He was tired of being wet and soggy as were most of the valley's inhabitants. Like most things in Crow's life, he had not thought much about the sun. But today, after such a long storm he was glad to see it. Yes, he was actually glad. Crow became quite impressed with himself as he pondered this new thought and the feeling that accompanied it.

Full of food and full of himself, Crow headed for the local farmer's field to get dessert. Halfway there he spotted it. Racing along the ground over grass, bush and rock sped the Shadow, dark and menacing as ever. Crow tried a sharp right turn and then dove straight for a sycamore tree. Perched on an inner branch, he looked all around for the Shadow but once again it had vanished. Just as he thought he might have lost it, Crow was attacked. A pair of angry mockingbirds, who had lost a nest of young to Crow's appetite, buzzed and pecked at him without mercy. Crow tried to explain about the Shadow but the mockingbirds would not listen. Without much choice, Crow reluctantly left the protecting cover of the sycamore. The persistent parents hounded him for the first hundred yards then headed back to their empty nest.

"How cruel these mockingbirds are to force me out into the open", Crow thought. He was not impressed with this second new thought or the feeling that came with it. Crow was about to feel sorry for himself when he spied the Shadow hot on his heels. He flew and flew and flew, then flew some more, but could not loose it. Crow had a lot of time to exercise his new ability to think and feel with all this flying. "Why is this happening to me!" he cried. "My life is falling apart."

A strange sensation overcame Crow as his fear melted into sadness. Awareness surged up from his inner most being and slowly spread through his newly acquired mental

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powers. Somehow he knew this Shadow. It was too familiar. And then it hit him squarely in the heart. The Shadow was his. With this last thought, a wave of shame engulfed Crow and sent him crashing down to earth. Lying in a heap in the middle of his own Shadow he began to weep. Crow's first taste of self-pity was salty and bitter.

Crow's head was spinning with new thoughts. Each thought brought another wave of feeling. Each feeling brought more tears. His body felt so different. The Shadow was filled with memories of all the things that Crow did not want to remember. He had worked so hard all his life to not think, feel or reflect. Yet somehow, sitting there surrounded by his Shadow, Crow had no defense against his sadness and shame. He became completely overwhelmed.

The first chill of the evening arrived as the Sun set behind the mountains. A gust of wind always seems to follow the last rays of light. And for the first time, Crow could feel how alone he was. Friends had never been important to him. Nor did he remember much about his own family. All he could recall was being very small and hungry in a crowded nest. Then, for no apparent reason, he was pushed out. Luckily, he landed in a soft pile of leaves and grass after a spring shower. The rain brought many earthworms to the surface. They served as little Crow's breakfast, lunch and dinner during his struggle to survive. The endless flow of tears escaping from the aching hole in Crow's heart was fed by these long forgotten images of pain and sorrow.

Crow fought for hours to regain control. He finally managed to shut off the tears and open his eyes only to find his Shadow gone. The night sky twinkled with beautiful starlight and the Crickets sang sad songs to their heavenly hosts. Exhausted, Crow finally surrendered to sleep just as the Milky Way began to shine in all its glory. Falling into a deep, deep sleep he was visited once again by the strange vision of the Sun. Crow felt mysteriously drawn to this source of warmth and light. The answer to his suffering lay somehow hidden within this radiant being. A sense of failure, followed by the return of the beautiful white bird, was the last images to fade when Crow opened his eyes the next morning.

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The Sun was well up in the morning sky and the valley teemed with activity. The Meadow Larks were singing good morning to a family of rabbits nibbling on a breakfast of fresh clover. The Beetles were busy cleaning the forest floor while butterflies danced across the flower tops. Crow had never really noticed his neighbors before. Their combined voices seemed to lift his sagging spirit. He wondered why he had never heard the beauty in this friendly chorus before.

Crow stood where he had crashed the evening before still surrounded by his shadow. Its cold touch chilled his heart and the hopelessness returned. Then, in a momentary flash of inspiration, Crow knew what he must do. He would fly to the Sun and ask this great being how to rid himself of his nagging Shadow. With the realization that the Shadow and the Sun were directly connected, Crow was determined to ask for help.

Crow struck out on his journey to the Sun filled with sadness and driven by fear. At first it looked as if his plan was going to work. The higher he flew the smaller the Shadow became. By noon it had shrunk to a tiny speck on the ground far below him. But as the Shadow grew smaller and more distant, Crow watched the Sun retreat higher and higher into the sky. The more he tried to escape his Shadow the farther away the Sun became.

Crow did not understand what was happening. He was doing the best he could. He was flying faster and higher than he had ever flown before. Crow's courage began to fail him. The strain of the thinning air caused his lungs to burn and wings to ache. Doubt crept into his thoughts.

Crow realized he was growing weaker as the distance increased between him and his Shadow. A strange thought filled his troubled mind. His physical strength was flowing from the very thing he was trying to escape. The cruelty of this thought broke Crow's will to continue. Then, as if he were not in enough pain already, the arrow of truth struck Crow straight through the heart. Now he knew why he could not shed this terrible Shadow of darkness. The small speck on the ground far below was merely a reflection. The true

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source of the Shadow lived within his very own body. "There is no way to escape myself!" Crow cried out in anguish, "I give up!"

With these words his puffed up pride collapsed carrying with it his last bit of courage. Defeated, Crow began to fall. The Earth raced towards him with a vengeance as gravity hurled his body down. His entire life, scene by scene, appeared before his eyes like some sad movie. Crow could feel the pain of everyone he had ever hurt as if he were viewing his life from their eyes. He knew he was going to die, and with this last thought he surrendered completely to the feeling of great sorrow that streamed from it. Through his tears, Crow caught the glimmer of what looked like white wings. The silhouette of the beautiful bird from his dream descending from the sun was the last thing Crow saw before he lost consciousness and his world went dark.

Somewhere deep within his being, Crow felt the sudden impact of his body hitting the earth. The jolt startled him into a dim awareness. "I'm still alive!" was his first thought. "How can this be?" pushed quickly in as the second. Then the flood gates opened and his mind began racing through all the events that occurred from the time he blacked out to the present moment.

It seemed Crow had fallen too far and was moving too fast for the white bird to stop his descent. Then, in his mind's eye, Crow watched the little white dove make the ultimate sacrifice. Knowing that Crow's fate was sealed, the dove placed its self between Crow and the approaching earth. It was just enough to break his fall.

Crow was beside himself in grief. Not only had he failed to rid himself of his shadow, but his desperate attempt caused the death of this innocent little dove. His shadow now lay across the still, little body like a dark blanket of despair. Crow cried and cried and cried some more. The waterfall of tears turned the ground beneath his feet into mud. The earth seemed to tremble under the weight of such a heavy sadness. The tremor shook Crow out of his sobbing stupor. His mouth fell open and his eyes bulged when he looked at

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where the body of the dove had been. To his utter amazement, standing in the very same spot, now grew a beautiful rose. The most spectacular rose he had ever seen.

The contrast between the rose's beauty and Crow's pitiful state was too much. Blinded by a rage that roared up from the very depths of his despair, Crow began pecking furiously at the rose. He tore at it mercilessly until not a single petal remained on the stem. Stunned and spent by his fury, Crow stared blankly at the battered stem and the tattered petals lying lifeless in the mud.

With the rose, Crow had destroyed the last remnants of his dignity. He fell, exhausted from his struggle, into the mud of his existence broken in both body and soul. It was as if his spirit had deserted him. He lay unconscious for what seemed like forever. For three days Crow lay in his deathlike sleep. Around noon of the fourth day the warmth of the sun on his jet black feathers started to bring life back into Crow's body. He felt quite groggy and a little lost. The first thought came from his stomach. Food! Crow was starving. He lifted up his shaky body and prepared himself to look for a meal.

Crow's second thought was to fly over to one of his neighbor's nest to see if they had any young to eat. But no sooner had this old thought crossed his mind when a vision of a little magpie chick who had fallen from her nest flashed before Crow's inner eye. Next, he saw himself swooping down, then gently lifting the baby bird up and placing it delicately back in its nest. Crow thought this fantasy very strange indeed. He had never thought or done anything like this ever before. He did not know what to make of it. Yet this vision was somehow kindling a warm and fuzzy feeling in his heart. And, as he allowed himself to concentrate on this feeling, it began to spread through his whole body, uplifting his spirit.

Crow decided to start at the farmer's field. There would probably be plenty of tasty seeds and fruit. He lifted off the ground with a newfound hope that added to the power and grace of his flight. The day was beautiful and Crow could not help crowing hello to each of his neighbors as he flew past them far below.

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Just before he reached the field, Crow heard a gentle little voice deep inside speak to him. It guided his attention to a large oak tree. His eyes finally settled on a little clump of new grass at the base of the great tree. A tiny speck of gray and white feathers was frantically bobbing back and forth. Then the voice guided his attention to a long, black king snake slithering silently toward the little bundle of feathers. Crow now felt drawn to the struggling little...bird? Yes! It was the baby magpie from his vision. And she was about to become the early bird dinner special for a hungry king snake.

Fueled by a quiet compassion, Crow swooped down and swept the baby magpie from the clutches of the king snake just in the nick of time. The little chick chirped desperately, unsure if she had been rescued or merely become someone else's dinner. Before she could decide, she found herself gently placed back in her nest unharmed, except for a few ruffled feathers.

Her parents, who had been out looking for dinner for the family, arrived just in time to see Crow disappear into the covering of the old oak. Suspecting Crow was up to his old tricks, they hurriedly flew in after him. They pecked furiously at Crow hoping to drive him away. Their daughter tried desperately to tell them of the great act of kindness Crow had performed. Finally she succeeded in getting their attention. As her parents listened to her chirp out the tale of her dangerous fall and dramatic rescue, they were filled with awe and gratitude. Quickly they apologized to Crow and thanked him for saving their baby. They looked at Crow with tears in their eyes and asked, "What is the cause of such a beautiful transformation in you?" Not sure himself, Crow merely shrugged his shoulders and cawed, "I don't know." They all three thanked him again as they said their goodbyes. Then Crow flew off urged by his now rumbling stomach.

The gentle inner voice continued guiding Crow toward more and more selfless acts of service for his fellow neighbors in the valley and beyond until the once isolated Crow was considered a friend to all who had the blessing of meeting him. Eventually, He gained an understanding of what this radical change in his life was truly about. Through listening closely to the quiet inner voice, Crow realized it was the spirit of the little white dove living

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in his heart. The dove taught Crow to love and accept his shadow by seeing it as scared, lonely or sad parts of him. Slowly and surely with the guidance of this living impulse, Crow transformed his shadow into a golden inner sun radiating faith, love and hope. Crow grew to cherish all life and finally to celebrate his humble destiny with gratitude.

Now, when his friends praise him for something he has done and ask him how does he do it? Crow simply tells them, "It is not I but the gift of grace that overflows from the spirit of the little white dove living in my heart." He thanks them and bids them a fond farewell then flies off straight and true. And that is the real story behind the old saying;

"AS STRAIGHT AS THE CROW FLIES!"